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61st year of publication

Somalia: new hopes

With the help of troops and tanks from Ethiopia, the U.N.-supported transitional government of Somalia has at last taken its seat in the country's capital, Mogadishu. But the rather easy ejection of the Islamic Courts Union and its supporters did not immediately lead to relief and peace in the streets of the city but to renewed anarchy and violence.

Somalia is at a critical moment. If the new government is not able to assert the kind of order that the Islamic Courts Union imposed on the city, it may slip back into its former state of "rule" by warring militias and thugs.

As soon as the Islamists withdrew from the city, the clan warlords rushed back in with their militias and gun-mounted jeeps to

claim their territories. Numerous gunfights ensued and the hospitals overflowed with victims.

In response to an appeal by the transitional government, three prominent warlords agreed to disarm. In return, they get a role in the new government and their militias will be absorbed into the army, after undergoing a period of training.

Ethiopia says that it is prepared to begin withdrawing its troops, an important step for the new government, for it does not want to appear dependent on its neighbor.

The African Union was meeting to hammer out an agreement that would send a sizeable peacekeeping force to Somalia. There are fears that if this isn't done promptly, the situation will



Recent fighting in Somalia has created more refugees

quickly deteriorate, as an estimated 3,000 Islamic fighters remain

dispersed throughout the city, having concealed their weapons.

Diplomatic efforts are underway to persuade moderate Islamic leaders to join in forming a new government.

When the country disintegrated in 1991 after the fall of dictator Siad Barre (and after an abortive attempt by the U.S. to restore order), thousands of Somalis fled the country. Many settled in Canada. But a number have now returned to their native land to help create a new order. Some have also fought on the side of the Islamists and been killed.

After 15 years of anarchy and rule by the gun, it won't be easy. But after 15 years there is also hope that gradually the country will achieve stability.

China's satellite smasher clouds future of space

Harry der Nederlanden

In recent years China has put on the image of the entrepreneur and trader, with little or no interest in military power. So its shooting down on January 11 of an ageing weather satellite – one of its own – came as a complete surprise.

What does the action mean? How do we interpret this dramatic act? Were the Chinese only burning space rubbish, as it were? Or were they boldly declaring themselves to be players in the weaponization of space?

Canada joined the U.S., Australia and Japan in protesting the space missile and in demanding an explanation. The U.S. and Russia, it is true, conducted similar tests over 20 years ago, but they desisted when the debris from the destroyed satellites threatened others. The earth is now being circled by hundreds of satellites performing

different services, mostly related to communications. The Chinese satellite that was shot down was circling about 865 km above the earth, at approximately the same level as many U.S. satellites used for military surveillance.

Recently, according to the Los Angeles times, John Negroponte, the head of U.S. intelligence, testified that China had been developing long-range missiles as well as medium and short range. In reaction, U.S. officials have begun expressing concern over China's military expansion and questioning its purpose. The destruction of the satellite is a threat to America's technological advantage, as much of its high-tech military weaponry depends on satellite guidance.

Last year the U.S. also expressed concern that China was developing laser technology capable of "blinding" its satellites

and rendering them useless.

China has offered no explanation for shooting down the satellite but assured the international community that it was not out to militarize space and that it had no intention of triggering another arms race.

The magazine *The Economist* speculated that China's action may have simply been a demonstration aimed at the U.S. to let it know that its supremacy in space is not absolute. That would put China's action in the same category as North Korea's missile launches over a year ago: symbolic acts designed to flout the hegemony of the world's sole – and fading – super power.

But why should a country in no way threatened by U.S. military action do something foolhardy and destructive just to swagger on the world stage? Critics point

out that the blast has created a huge cloud of debris composed of many hundreds of fragments that will continue to circle the earth for 20 years or more endangering other satellites.

Analysts have also speculated that perhaps China is worried by the U.S. plan to build a space-based system for detecting intercontinental ballistic missiles. This would render its nuclear arsenal useless.

It seems more likely, perhaps, that the action is calculated to bring the U.S. to the negotiating table. In 2002 China and Russia proposed a treaty banning the weaponization of space in an attempt to head off another expensive arms race. But the U.S. has insisted that space is a no-man's land like the high seas, unwilling to have any limitations imposed upon it.

Some commentators expressed

anxiety that the action, combined with uncertainty about China's intentions and the growth of its economic and military power, will have the opposite effect – an escalation in the development of space weapons.

The U.S. issued a statement saying that China's "development and testing of such weapons is inconsistent with the spirit of cooperation that both countries aspire to in the civil space area."

But this statement about cooperation seems in turn inconsistent with the earlier American declaration that it reserves the right to do in space whatever it deems necessary for its own security.

Although the project is secret, it is believed that the U.S. has been working on laser weaponry capable of shooting down enemy satellites.

News

Under siege: Iraq's Christians face struggle for survival

In regions afflicted by war, violence is only part of the problem that ordinary families face. Behind the bombs and bullets lies a second battle, the battle to make ends meet. In the second of a series of special reports, Barnabas Fund highlights how the war in Iraq is affecting the ability of Iraqi Christians to provide for themselves, their families, and their futures.

Dora, Baghdad: Yousef * swept the last of the day's cuttings from the floor, leant the broom against the wall and looked at the clock. Soon he could close up his barber shop in this mixed Sunni – Shia neighborhood and head home to his family. Through the small and dusty window the street scene outside was normal for this time of day: traders packing up; children playing noisily in the road. Dusk.

Minutes later Yousef would be lying on his back in a pool of blood and broken glass in his shop. The Sunni insurgents who attacked him left him beaten, one of his legs broken and his back badly damaged. It was a warning; in a salon not far from his, the proprietor lay dead.

Christian workers targeted

Yousef's only 'crime' was running his business – cutting hair and trimming beards. One of the motives behind the attack was to stop him from working. The Sunni group that attacked Yousef want to drive the Christians and Shia out of Dora. One way they can do this is to stop them from being able to work to support themselves and their families.

Barnadet understands this only too well. An Iraqi Christian, her husband had worked in a liquor store in Baghdad. In June 2006 Sunni insurgents attacked the store, because it violated the Quranic prohibition against alcohol. They left the workers dead. With no way to support herself and her two children, Barnadet had little choice but to leave her old life behind and flee to the relative safety of Syria.

Economics of war

Such stories are not unique to Baghdad, or even to Iraq. In times of war, economics becomes a weapon, and a functioning economy is always one of the first casualties of the fighting. In the struggle for scarce resources, Iraqi Christians – a minority mistrusted and despised by many of their fellow countrymen – almost inevitably fare badly.

The violence engulfing Iraq has led to rising costs and falling living standards. Shopping has been very difficult in the last few years, due to the fear of bomb blasts in markets and streets, as each group targets the other, depending on which area was last hit. In a recent attack, seven Christians were caught in a blast in a Christian district of Baghdad, Camp Sara.

As Paulos*, an Iraqi Christian community leader explains, "nowadays much shopping is done from the backs of trucks and vans,

which go around to residential streets and people go out and buy what is available there. If the seller runs out of tomatoes, families go without, as it is too dangerous to go to the local market." His point is well made: as we were talking on the telephone yesterday, a report came through of a bomb exploding in a food market in Dora. Ten more Iraqis who will never again go home to their families.

The cost of living in an Iraqi city is high, Paulos estimates that the average person needs at least \$300-\$400 each month to live on. "That's if you have your own house," he adds. "If you rent your accommodation, you need to find at least \$200-\$300 for rent alone."

Christians left visible and vulnerable

Finding such sums is far from easy, with fewer and fewer jobs available to Christians. Working privately brings the risk of being mistaken by insurgents as a worker for a foreign company. This can lead to being kidnapped for ransom, threatened or even killed. Work within government offices is also hard to come by for Christians, as ministries have become the fiefdoms of the group in charge of them; Sunnis will employ their own people and Shia their own.

In these neighborhoods even your name and appearance can reveal your religion. The militant gangs who roam looking for prey can easily identify Christians, many of whom stand out because of their fair complexion. Christians are left vulnerable to attack by any number of groups, whether religiously motivated Sunni and Shia militia, or gangs in it just for the money.

For some Christians, the nature of the work available to them brings inherent risks. Security firms are one of the few professions still willing to take on Christian workers. Khalil*, an Assyrian Christian, found work as a security guard protecting government property in 2006. His patrol was attacked by an insurgent group, leaving him too badly injured to work again. As the bread winner and main protector for his family, this was a double blow. He now lives as a refugee in Syria with his wife, children and elderly parents.

The places and personal circumstances vary each time – between June and August of 2006 reported Christian victims included a traffic warden in Baghdad, an engineer at a Basra power station, a shepherd tending his flock near Dohuk, and two furniture makers in Mosul – but the underlying factor behind the attacks is always the same. They are targeted because they are Christian; they are vulnerable because the need to work puts them in situations of risk; and they leave behind families who will struggle to survive without them.

Restrictions on movement

In Iraqi cities, neighborhoods are being locked down into sectarian strongholds. Moving freely between areas is becoming

harder, even for those who are neither Sunni nor Shia. These difficulties bring a new dimension of problems for workers, as professionals cannot get to their place of work, tradesmen cannot visit their customers, and passing trade for shops and stalls dwindles.

The home life that these dangerous jobs are paying for is far from comfortable or safe. Basic services have suffered in all the major cities. Water plants are a regular target for insurgents, so much of what water is received is usually not clean or hygienic enough to drink. Electricity supplies are infrequent, with few qualified electricians available to repair the damage caused to generating stations by years of neglect and compounded by frequent insurgent attacks. The few hours of electricity available to homes each day means that appliances such as fridges and freezers are now something of the past.

Danger stalks the communities lived in by Christians. Last week alone there were reports of several attacks by Islamic militants on Christian communities in Baghdad, and in Mosul at least four Christians were killed by a gang of insurgents.

Stories of kidnap of Christians from their homes or places of work for ransom abound. Militia gangs see the Christian minority as a good source of funding for their activities. Ransom demands are often extortionate, but as time goes on kidnappers are becoming more willing to negotiate downwards, to sums that can realistically be raised in a short time. This indicates an opportunistic streak – gangs are happy to get what they can. The flipside is that they are putting a lower and lower price on human life.

Whereas once they would have killed for lack of a few thousand dollars, now they will kill for a fraction of that.

An additional hurdle for Christian families in Iraq is ensuring that their children receive an education. Many families, especially those with young girls, will keep their children at home rather than risk them in the pursuit of an education. There are various sources of threat. In one area, where the Mahdi Army is active, students will be targeted for not wearing Islamic dress. Schools and universities have frequently been targeted for bombings, leaving many students too scared to attend. Others simply abandon their studies because of the need to work to support their families. This short-term need is jeopardising their long-term economic future.

Driven out of Iraq

The result of all these factors is that many

Iraq's refugees

Iraqis are being killed by the hundreds every week as Sunnis murder Shiites and vice versa. Others are killed simply for cooperating in some way with the "occupiers" and still others by kidnappers and criminals taking advantage of the chaos. But there are also those who are neither Sunni nor Shiite – Christians and other non-Muslims – and they are often targeted by all sides.

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have fled their homes for a wide variety of reasons. At first it was Sunnis high in the Saddam regime who had good reason to flee. But now most are fleeing sectarian violence. Sunnis and Shiites are fleeing formerly mixed neighborhoods to settle among their own kind. Others, especially Christians, have fled to Lebanon, Jordan and especially Syria. For them there are few places in Iraq where they now feel secure, although some have fled northward into the Kurdish area, where there is a large Assyrian Christian community near Mosul.

According to one account, as many as a half-million Iraqis, mainly from the middle class, have fled to Amman and Damascus in Syria. But there are no accurate statistics. An estimated 50 percent of the refugees in Syria is said to be Christian.

About half of Iraq's Christian community has fled. According to the U.K.-based Barnabas Fund, while they comprise only about 3 to 4 percent of Iraq's population, Christians make up nearly one-fourth of the refugees.

A spokesman for the Chaldean church in Baghdad appealed to Christians abroad for support. Some dozen churches and monasteries in Baghdad have been forced to close due to threats from Islamists.

Recently the U.S. State Department announced that it will receive more refugees; however, the process is complicated by the fact that applicants have to go through the U.N. And although Christians were much safer under Saddam, Iraq is now regarded as a liberated country where there is no systematic persecution. In 2005, the U.S. provided refuge to about 200 Iraqi refugees. Not even those who have been working for the Americans as translators and who now find their lives threatened have found it easy to get into the U.S.

Christians do not know where to turn. They need to work to earn money to survive. Doing so puts them at the mercy of the Sunni and Shia militia gangs, who have made it clear that they want the Christians out of Iraq. The home life they are working to preserve is unrecognisable from that before the fall of Saddam. Caught between a rock and hard place, those who can are choosing a third option; flight to safety. "Family life, as it was before the invasion, has changed dramatically", says Paulos. "Christian houses have become open prisons, out of fear of indiscriminate bombing. These factors make leaving for Syria and Jordan more attractive prospects."

* all names have been changed for the safety of the people involved.

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News/Politics

EU expansion at an end?

On the first day of the new year the European Union admitted two new members, Romania and Bulgaria, both former communist states within the old Soviet bloc. This puts membership in the EU at 27, thus making the nascent federation an increasingly unwieldy collection of disparate states. There are now 23 official languages, with translation services making up a progressively larger portion of its total budget. The institutions of the EU, including the Commission and the European Parliament, have had to expand as well.

What does this mean for the EU's future? At present its eventual status is uncertain, due in part to the rejection in 2005 of the proposed European Constitution by the voters of France and the Netherlands. Moreover, the EU is now civilizationally divided, as Samuel Huntington would put it, in a way that it was not before. Back in 1957, when the European Economic Community was established, Italy, France, West Germany and the Benelux countries were all unequivocally western in orientation, with Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as the major faiths. After last month, however, there are four countries with Orthodox majorities: Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania. Their presence could further complicate efforts to chart unified foreign and defence policies for the Union, especially as it relates to Vladimir Putin's Russian Federation.

One unintended consequence of an enlarged EU is the attainment of official party status within the European Parliament of the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty coalition, which brings together a number of far-right groups, including France's *Front National*. With immigration becoming an increasingly contentious issue across Europe, this group could get larger at the next EP elections in 2009. Though still small, its deputies will now have a platform for disseminating their extremist ideas.

Then, of course, there's Turkey, whose application

**Principalities & Powers**

David T. Koyzis

for EU membership was made 20 years ago, when a number of newer members were still communist states. This long delay infuriates Turkey's government, which has been making efforts to clean up its own house to meet EU standards – sizeable efforts from Ankara's perspective. Yet these never seem to be enough. True, Turkey continues its abysmal human rights record. It still refuses to allow the Patriarchate of Constantinople to reopen its theological school in the island of Halki in the Sea of Marmara which it arbitrarily closed in 1971.

Nevertheless, western and central Europeans have long memories, especially of the two Ottoman sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683. With Turkey's population expanding rapidly and Europe's contracting, there are widespread fears of what that country's EU membership could spell for Europe as a whole over the long term. It could entail the introduction of an Islamic bloc, bolstered by the possible presence of Albania and Macedonia, alongside the Orthodox and post-Christian western blocs. This would make Europe cumbersome indeed and effectively gut any efforts to make of the EU a genuine federation with even a semblance of internal unity.

For all these reasons EU enlargement may have come to at least a temporary pause. Those countries, such as Britain, envisioning a less supranational Europe with no federal ambitions have little fear of admitting new members, because they don't see it ever achieving the unity envisioned by its original architects. However, those favoring a united Europe governed as a Canadian-style constitutional federation are increasingly reticent about absorbing too many more member states and thus rendering their ultimate goal unachievable. Coupled with popular discontent over the proposed European Constitution, this could mean that a 27-member European Union will be with us for some time.

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Iran leadership fight

Iranian newspapers have carried evidence of a rift within Iran's top leadership. Iran's supreme cleric, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, it appears, is not entirely happy with the course followed by President Ahmadinejad. Not everyone in Iran agrees with his aggressive anti-Western diatribes or with the effect his determined pursuit of nuclear power is having on the economy. A large group of members of parliament signed a letter criticising the president for spending too much time abroad and for his economic policies.

Ahmadienad is a populist whose platform promised an improved

economy, a wider redistribution of the oil wealth and more jobs. His critics pointed out that his nuclear policy has caused inflation and that the threat of sanctions is chasing investment out of the country. Food and housing prices have risen steeply as inflation has risen to 30 percent.

One of the country's newspapers, owned by Ayatollah Khamenei, called on the president to stay out of all matters nuclear. In Iran it is actually the Ayatollah, not the president, who is supposed to be in charge of foreign policy; however, over the past year

See Iran on page 16...

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Editorial

Ice trees

The trees, underbrush, and weeds were all covered with a thin glaze of ice. The pines and firs were feeling the weight, their branches sagging, but their dark green hues set off the white glaze to best advantage. Each dark needle seemed tipped with a tiny bulb of glass. The filigree of ice on even the smallest twigs filled the woods with sparkle and dazzle wherever you turned your head.

A slight breeze suddenly turned the trees into a symphony of tinkling clicking twittering branches, as ice played upon ice. I was the first one on the trail that morning and had to step carefully, for the icy glaze covered everything.

It had been raining gently when we'd gone to bed the previous night and then begun to freeze. When we got up, it was still drizzling slightly but, to our relief, it had soon stopped. We didn't want a repeat of the Quebec ice storm of a few years ago, which brought down entire forests of trees and left thousands without power for several days.

As we set off for the office that morning, the sun had peeked out for a moment and suddenly set the trees along the road afire with white flame. "I'm going to play hooky awhile this morning," I told Rose. "I simply have to see what Short Hills looks like with the trees all cased in ice like this."

"Why drive out there?" she asked. "You can see it right here. This is pretty."

Of course it was pretty to see the maples and firs in our neighborhood turned into Christmas decorations by a coat of icy light. But I knew the dark streets and houses were not enhancing the effect. Now that I was surrounded by glistening trees my suspicion was confirmed.

The effect out here was magnified a thousandfold. The entire woods shimmered with reflected light that seemed to be in constant movement, rippling and sparkling from tree to tree and from twig to twig.

The dark red rose hips coated with ice caught the early sun. The arched raspberry bushes showed their purple sheen enhanced by the icy glaze, and I could now walk through the raspberry patches without getting snagged, for their thorns were blunted by the ice. Tall weeds and reeds looked as if they had been encased in glass to better display their peculiar beauty.

As I sashayed along the trail, looking first this way then the other, spinning around to look behind me, hardly knowing where to look next because everything beckoned with its glitter, suddenly the sun once again



peeked between the snow clouds – and the world became incandescent, turning into crystalline light. It seemed a revelation. The hard, impenetrable substance of things seemed suddenly illusion: the world is really comprised of light that has taken temporary form and that migrates about, rippling through everything with its glorious energy. Right here, bursting out of the trees and branches, flaring and flickering along the edges and shapes of things, was the same dance of light one sees in the milky way and the starry galaxies.

I was virtually spinning in my eagerness to see it all, for it lasted only a few moments. Then the sun disappeared once again behind a dark cloud and I was left with a muted echo of what had been revealed. But the brightness left me dazzled and staggering for a moment. I laughed aloud in glee. I giggled in delight. I giggled like a fool. It was a good thing there were no others on the trail that morning; they would have thought me mad as a hatter.

I was waving my digital camera around a bit, but I knew it was futile to try snapping pictures. There was simply too much light to cope with. Even my own eyes had difficulty coping and they usually do a much better job than my camera.

Nevertheless, I was determined to capture some memory of this excess of beauty to serve as wallpaper on my computer. In some places the overhanging branches bowing down under the weight of ice hung so low over the trail, I had to circle around or almost crawl underneath them. As I strayed off the trail into the deeper snow, it sounded as if I were stepping through storm windows as my feet crashed through the icy crust on top of the snow cover.

Emerging almost on hands and knees from beneath a sagging stand of evergreens, I was looking across a small snow-covered meadow to a hedgerow of silver trees against a grey sky suddenly awirl with small snowflakes. It was all silver on white on gray, but perched in the tops of the trees was a flock of red-winged blackbirds – a miracle of color in a world all burnished pale.

The sharp beauty was almost like a stab of pain.

I crunched on farther off the trail, following what I figured were deer trails, though I saw no deer tracks this morning. The icy crust, I surmise, is no delight to the fragile legs of deer. But down in the ravine I heard the sound of the creek and crunched thataway for a looksee.

It was orange – the creek flowing through the white and silver landscape was almost orange. With the ground not yet frozen, a few rainy days had swept enough pigment from fields of yellow clay upstream into the creeks to stain them orange-brown. On another day, the creek would probably only have looked muddy, but in this landscape of snow and ice it looked almost as if it were flowing with orange juice.

As I circled back to the trail, I noticed that my feet had broken through ice here and into the water underneath and that my "waterproof" boots were failing. As I hurried down the trail to snap a picture of a stand of tall pines, I wasn't watching where I was putting my feet and suddenly my boots broke through snow-covered ice; mud geysered up almost to my knees. No matter which way I stepped, the ice crumbled and I sank into the dark, sticky stuff underneath.

A whirl of snow, a clattering of branches, a loud cracking and somewhere nearby an ice-covered bough came crashing down. As I got closer to the stand of pines, I saw that a large branch high up had broken off and stripped off a couple of others, leaving yellow gashes on the trunk.

Beauty exacts a price.

Back in the van, I took a different route home, and at several places had to carefully wend my way around fallen branches. In my eagerness to get out to the woods to enjoy the beauty of a world encased in ice and light, I had not really noticed that the ice had done some damage after all.

As I drove back, I reflected on the exhilaration I'd felt scurrying through the woods like someone intoxicated with beauty and rushing on to drink in still more. Experiencing great beauty is an intense encounter with what is most real, almost an immediacy of meaning, as if this is the purpose of it all. Yet, it was all surface sheen, wasn't it – all glitter and light, fields and forests turned into jewels, trees turned into chandeliers.

I was reminded of Goethe's Faust: "Verweile doch, du bist so schön." [Oh, please stay: you are so beautiful.] Beauty is a seduction. It traps us in this moment, in this appearance and sensation. We are imbued with the sense that we are in contact with the essence and substance of things. Dazzled, the mind can hardly think of anything else; everything else falls into the background as trivial. We are raptured. We leave the company of common concerns. We seem, as it were, to step for a moment outside the flow of events, the processes of history and wheelings and dealing of ordinary existence. We vibrate like an antenna in the wind, feeling the nearness of something we otherwise miss.

Hence, the sharp intake of breath and the pain like a stitch in the side. Momentarily, we are torn. The heart leaps, quiver with eagerness. But we know at the same time that this moment is evanescent, already leaving, the sun passing behind the clouds.

When I returned a couple of days later to take another walk in the ice encrusted woods, I was promptly brained by a chunk of ice that broke free from a branch overhead.

Yet, though it is a seduction and a mirage, beauty is a witness. That's why it kindles joy and delight. The pain we feel is one of longing, but it is not the longing of escape. It is the language of presence. We see, we experience, we feel that which is already and which was from the beginning but which is now only faintly discernible, obscured. But it is real; it is there, and it has a deep affinity, a friendship with light and life and happiness. It is a faint effulgence of his glory and of the beauty to come.

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Letters/News

A visit to the video store

My husband and I were looking forward to spend some quality time with two of our grandchildren. After they arrived, we set out to go to the video store to find a good movie that we could watch together that evening.

But the excursion became a thought-provoking venture. Harsh realities came tumbling down on us like ice cold water.

Meandering through the video store, we, the 9- and 13-year-old, tried to find the family section. To get to the family oriented videos, we first had to walk through neatly displayed horror, mystery, funny, scary and the restricted video sections. All sorts of morbid, blood-stained, cut up images on video jackets looked us in the face.

At last in the far corner we came to the family section. But where were the good-old Walt Disney movies – the ones we used to watch when our kids were little? They were replaced with unrealistic animated characters with big scary eyes and make up.

I picked up a video about the Sumarai. The cover explained that a decade ago the deadliest assassin Meyi Revolution swore he had killed for the last time. But peace doesn't last. When revolution rises again, he must take up his blunted sword to protect the innocent. Will he save his friends from

their own mistakes? Or will he fall victim to his bloody past, slain by demons of his own creation?

On one video in the children's fantasy section, in the Genesis series, a group of three children called Evangelion find an unborn angel in an active volcano. How can they survive under a million tons of molten lava?

There are 9 more in this series called Genesis. Genesis to what?

I could not help thinking, What mind-set could create such cluttered garbage? What does it do to the minds of young viewers?

We went home with the only one Lassie movie in the store.

The next day I felt the urge to dig a little deeper. I drove to a video store operated by religious folk on the other side of the city.

Entering the store, I saw a religious symbol hanging behind the counter. I felt better already. The family section was much larger, better organized and had a far better selection. But at least one quarter of it was also filled with the unrealistic animated young characters.

Filled with disgust, I turned around, only to stare at the un-rated section of new releases. I saw the video called *Hills have no Eyes*. Info on the cover read, "Horror masterpiece

– a family falls prey to blood thirsty mutants – packed with gut-wrenching gore, ghostly make-up and heart-stopping suspense."

I whizzed around the corner, only to see a huge selection of graphic, hard-core pornography lining the walls for long stretch. That took the cake!

I marched up to the counter. Pointing to the religious symbol, I said, "I guess you are Christians?"

"Yes," said the man. "My wife too."

"Well, as Christians, how can you sell that kind of garbage videos over there?" I asked.

Without blinking an eye, the owner said, "Oh, madam, me no can make money without that."

I left disgusted, frustrated and disheartened.

When had the movie business made such swift turnabout? It seemed only yesterday that the shelves were stocked full of good, moral-boosting, videos portraying excellent family values?

Pondering the day's events that evening, the same kind of concerns my own father had expressed some 55 years ago, came to mind. My father, who had fought for justice issues all his life, said to me, "How is it that

so many people criticize to no end one of the greatest inventions the Lord has put on earth? Rather than negative criticisms why not use this marvelous invention to further God's Kingdom work? Isn't that what God expects of us?"

Reminiscing about the past and facing today, I wondered where the Christian voice is in all of this. I am amazed how much our Christian forefathers have accomplished the last 100 years or so. They built churches, Christian schools, colleges and seminaries and added additions to the additions.

Could it be that most of the ground work has been done now and that, as ambassadors of Christ, we now need to take a bigger role in the lines of wholesome entertainment with Christian script-writers, producers, directors and photography?

How many of us are chosen for that purpose in a world that ceaselessly marches forward?

Envision how the message of good, wholesome, and family oriented movies are seen by millions of viewers everywhere.

What great God pleasing achievement that would be.

Gertie Pool
Abbotsford, BC.

Calvin College creates help center for school administrators

Calvin College is establishing a new center that will help Christian school administrators better do their job.

An innovative new center at Calvin College will bring fresh resources to beleaguered Christian school administrators.

The VanLunen Center for Executive Management in Christian Schools is being established at Calvin thanks to a \$2 million gift to the college from the Richard D. VanLunen Foundation. The Center's purpose will be to provide world-class executive management education for heads of schools based on the historic Christian faith (of which there are some 20,000 across the continent).

The center will serve faith-based schools large and small across the U.S. and Canada. It will practice a big-tent philosophy, reaching out to schools from a wide-range of faith traditions, including Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Episcopal, independent Christian, Lutheran and Reformed Christian day schools.

Gordon VanderBrug, a trustee with the VanLunen Foundation, says Calvin was a natural choice to host the center. "We were looking for an institution that had a solid understanding of Christian schools and was excellent in management education," he says, "and we found it in Calvin College."

Dr. Shirley Roels has just been appointed as the first VanLunen Center director and will shift into the role after a 27-year career at Calvin that has seen her serve the college in a variety of ways, such as professor of business management and the dean of academic administration. She will continue to serve as director of the Lilly Vocation Program.

Roels, who combines a 1971 bachelor's degree from Calvin in secondary education with a master's in business administration

from the University of Michigan and a Ph.D. in college and university administration from Michigan State, is thrilled about the new challenge on her horizon and says now is a critical time for such a center. She notes that many schools with a clear Christian mission, sound strategy and good planning are growing, but that the role of Christian school heads is changing – often times in dramatic ways.

Jim Marsh, head of school at Westminster Christian Academy in St. Louis, Missouri, where he has served for two decades, agrees. He says the role has seen a significant shift from internal to external, requiring skills and capacities far different from those of an educational leader who comes up through the ranks of the schoolhouse.

"School leadership is becoming more complex and challenging," he says. "Boards are looking to the head, the CEO if you will, to set and keep the school's vision, take significant leadership in fundraising and strategic planning, and recruit and retain the best and brightest faculty and staff."

Echoing those sentiments is Bill Burke, head of school at St. Sebastian's, a Catholic school in Needham, Mass. "The center will fill a huge void," he says. "It is an idea whose time is long overdue. I can't wait to get started."

Roels is eager to tap into that kind of excitement and to connect to educational leaders from a wide range of circles. "The cultivation of senior leaders from many ethnic groups, both men and women, is important," she says. "God's church includes people from every culture and future Christian schools should mirror such diversity."

School heads like that idea

"The 'big tent' is really one of the most impressive aspects of the Van Lunen Center," says David Hahn, head of school at Long Island Lutheran Middle and High School in Brookville, N.Y. "People who connect with the center will have the chance to step out of their personal denominational confines and grow from the experiences and practices of other Christ-centered traditions."

Roels, the product of Christian grade and high schools, can't wait to get started. "There is no other entity that provides executive leadership development for school heads that is distinctively Christian and specifically

focused on Christian schools," she says. "The Van Lunen Center will be a very special place for the intersection of Christian faith, school needs and executive leadership development which will be without parallel in North America. Other universities and associations provide leadership development for heads of private schools, but do not emphasize the special nature of a Christian school's mission and executive leadership imperatives because of that mission. Yet the majority of private schools in the U.S. exist because they are the products of a Christian faith tradition that is determined to teach that faith to the next generation."

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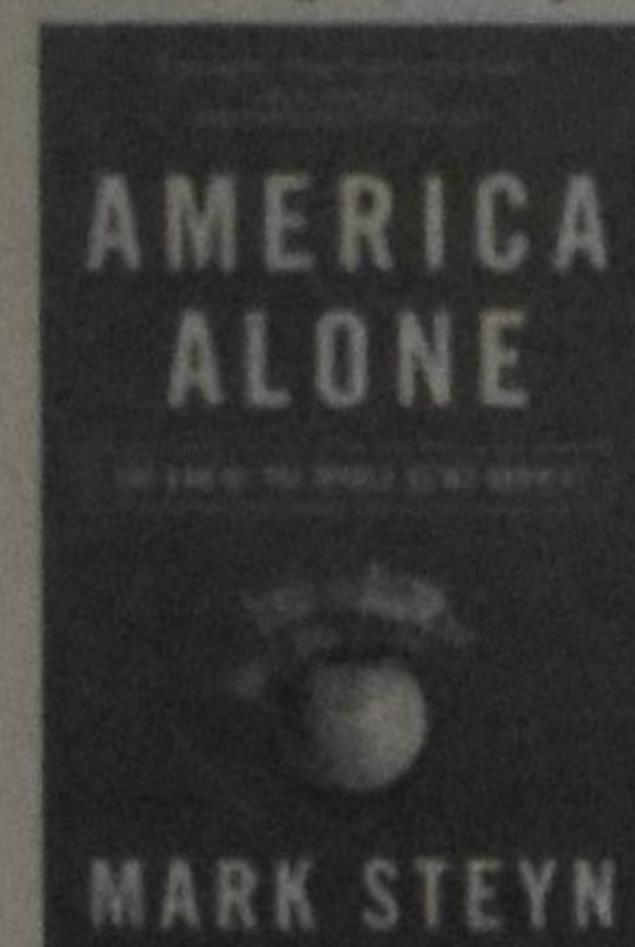
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Opinion

We Have Seen the Enemy, and it's us

Harry Antonides

It is secularism itself which is part of the problem, not the solution, since secularism is precisely what created the Euro spiritual/moral vacuum into which Islam has rushed headlong. (Kathy Shaidle)



The above statement is a good summary of the problems now faced by the Western democracies. It is also one that makes up the main theme of Mark Steyn's *America Alone: The End of the World as we Know it*.

Steyn argues that the enemy we face in the Western democracies is not in the first place external, but one that resides in our own midst, namely, the spiritual and moral vacuum at the core of our civilization. He describes this as a severe case of "civilizational exhaustion," marked by a lack of confidence, self-loathing, and a spirit of appeasement, prevalent among the cultural elite in the West.

A road without signposts

This view of the world has given rise to the idea that no culture is better than any other. They are merely different, not worse or better. In fact, even to speak of right and wrong is considered judgmental and exclusive, a violation of the first commandment of the multicultural ideology: Thou shalt not consider one culture superior over another, especially not thine own.

Steyn convincingly shows that radical Islamists are making substantial inroads into the Western democracies by cleverly exploiting the prevailing belief in multiculturalism. Their success is due to the fact that this ideology – to be sharply distinguished from the reality of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity – deprives their adherents of the will and ability to defend themselves against destructive outside forces.

Steyn cuts to the heart of the issue: "Non-judgmental multiculturalism is an obvious fraud, and was subliminally accepted on that basis. After all, most adherents to the idea that all cultures are equal don't want to live in anything but an advanced Western society.... Multiculturalism was conceived by the Western elites not to celebrate all cultures but to deny their own: it is, thus, the real suicide bomb."

This is why the West is its own worst enemy, for there is nothing appealing or inspiring about a culture that despises itself, especially one that, paradoxically, has elevated self-gratification as its highest good.

Steyn points out that you can't identify with a nullity. He poses the choice facing teenagers in most European cities as follows, "you've a choice between two competing identities – a robust confident Islamic identity or a tentative post-nationalist cringingly apologetic European identity. It would be a mistake to think that the former is attractive

only to Arabs and North Africans,"

Shades of Munich

Steyn provides many examples of cringingly apologetic Europeans. The most dramatic and ominous one happened in Spain in 2004.

On March 11, 2004, more than 200 Spaniards were killed and many more wounded in a series of train bombings in Madrid. Before this happened, it was widely expected that the incumbent national government of Jose Maria Aznar, which supported the war in Iraq, would be re-elected. However, the main opposition Socialist Workers party had campaigned on the pledge to withdraw the Spanish soldiers from Iraq. The timing of the bombing, three days before the election, was perfect for its perpetrators, for the Aznar government was soundly defeated. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish soldiers left Iraq.

The lesson was lost on no one: "You will pay in blood for standing with the Americans." Steyn called this abject surrender to terrorists "an exercise in mass self-gelding."

The fallout of the Danish cartoons in late 2005 provided more evidence of Western cowardice, invariably covered with pious declarations of respect for the sensitivities of Muslim believers. But there were no protests against the killings and death threats by Muslims. Only more threats, apologies and a statement from Kofi Anan that the cartoons had originated in a country that had recently "acquired a significant Muslim population, and is not yet sure how to adjust to it."

Here was the top international bureaucrat lecturing the free world to graciously accept the dictates of those who have no respect for the freedom of others. Nothing about the need for newcomers to respect the institutions and laws of the country they now live in. With that kind of leadership at the highest international level, is it any wonder that we now live in a deeply troubled and dangerously unstable world?

One Muslim demonstrator in Toronto spelled out his message without any pretensions of niceness: "We won't stop the protests until the world obeys Islamic law."

Such a claim gets to the core of militant Islam and its relationship to the free world. No doubt it does not represent the views of all Muslims, perhaps only a minority. But this public statement, echoed by many others quoted in this book, drives home the grave difficulty of peacefully integrating the followers of this branch of Islam. The problem in the West is that it refuses honestly to face that reality.

Churches have not avoided the trap of appeasement and what Steyn calls the tendency toward "cringing" apologetics. This is taking place against a backdrop of the waning influence and huge membership losses of mainline churches in the West. At the same time Islam is making new converts here, some of whom have joined the ranks of terrorists, such as Richard Reid, the shoe bomber; Germaine Lindsay, one of the July

7 London Tube terrorists; and the Belgian, Muriel Deguaque, who was killed in a suicide attack on U.S. troops in Baghdad.

In 2005, a group of Anglican bishops published a document, which advocated that Western Christians should show "institutional repentance" for the Iraq war by having their leaders present a formal apology to a gathering of "mainly Muslim" leaders. Dr. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, stated during the Afghan campaign that the U.S. Air Force pilot and the suicide bomber are morally equivalent.

Hard choices

In 2006, a number of writers, including Irshad Manji, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Salman Rushdie, published a manifesto against Islamism while advocating "secular values for all." Steyn dis-agrees, because he finds secular humanism an "insufficient rallying cry."

He envisions three possible outcomes of the present struggle against radical Islam:

1. Submit to Islam
2. Destroy Islam
3. Reform Islam

He thinks that one is possible and even more likely than most suspect; that two does not bear thinking about; and that option three is not for us because reforming Islam can be done only by Muslims. All the free world can do, he says, is "create conditions that increase the likelihood of Muslim reform." Following is a much-abbreviated summary of his list of suggestions:

1. Support women's rights in the Muslim world;
2. Roll back Wahhabism and similar radical "exports";
3. Support economic and political liberty in the Muslim world;
4. De-legitimize Islamic states that persecute non-Muslims;
5. Eliminate the flow of funds from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other sources to mosques, madrasas, etc., in America and elsewhere;
6. Develop a strategy to counter Islamism on the ideological front;
7. Marginalize and euthanize the UN, NATO, etc., and devote the money wasted on them to results-oriented multilateralism;
8. Cease bankrolling unreformable oil dictatorships by developing alternative energy sources;
9. End the Iranian regime;
10. Strike militarily when the opportunity presents itself.

Some of these recommended actions are, or should be, non-controversial; some are now being done, though not very well. To do them more effectively, and particularly to undertake the last two recommendations is very unlikely, given the lack of agreement among the Western nations about the nature of the enemy and what to do about it.

This is a controversial book because it contradicts the current politically correct orthodoxy. But that is exactly what is now needed to avoid the calamitous misjudgements of Munich 1938.

Stirrings of renewal and hope

We are used to hearing reports from Europe of Christianity's decline in the face of militant secularism. In Holland, a country of special interest to many readers of this publication, churches are emptying while mosques are proliferating. The country was shocked by two horrendous murders committed in the name of Islam. Stories of "honor killings" in Muslim immigrant families persist. There is much talk of that country becoming Islamicized. But amidst much bad news along this line, there is some evidence that this situation is changing for the better. So let me add a positive note.

Joshua Livestro has written a fascinating article entitled "Holland's Post-Secular Future: Christianity is Dead. Long Live Christianity!" (*Weekly Standard*, January 1, 2007) He reports: "Years of gradual but seemingly unstoppable secularization have given way to a reaffirmation of old religious identities." He backs this claim by referring to the increasing popularity of Christian literature and the Alpha Course program, and most importantly a "growing spiritual hunger" and a search for truth among the youth of Holland. Numerous "home churches" drawing thousands of youth have sprung up in the major Dutch cities.

Coinciding with this surprising return to the Christian faith in Holland, the flow of Muslim immigration has slowed and been overtaken by a larger number of Christians from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and other parts of Europe.

Harry Antonides

Can this trend be reversed?

This brings us to what I perceive to be the main contribution of this book. The author has understood that the enemy cannot be defeated by military force alone – though that is required sometimes. The main problem is internal, and they have to do with our roots, our moral/spiritual foundations, which are inevitably of a religious nature.

To be blunt about it: we are trying to live without God, and that's why we are in deep trouble. Our problem is that we are adrift and no match for radical Islam that wants to impose a theocracy in which all are forced to bow to its God. Our problem is not that the Islamists who have declared war on the free West are strong, but that we are weak. Steyn is right in this diagnosis:

Islamism is militarily weak but ideologically confident. The West is militarily strong but ideologically insecure. The suicide bomber is a symbol of weakness, of a culture so comprehensively failed that what ought to be its greatest resource – its people – is instead as disposable as a firecracker. But in our self-doubt the enemy's weakness becomes his strength.

Can this weakness and doubt be overcome? It might happen if there were a wake-up call in the form of a calamitous attack destroying a large city or an entire region, such as threatened by Iran and other leaders of radical Islam. But such an attack might also produce the Madrid syndrome.

There is reason to fear for the future of our children if current trends continue. That's why *America Alone* is a timely book. But

See The Enemy on p. 11...

Stewardship

Supporting a relative in long-term care

There are many ways to stay connected

Lisa M. Petsche

My husband's aunt, who was living alone and experiencing numerous health problems, moved to a nursing home a while ago. Although she'd exhausted other options, she was extremely unhappy about the situation, and initially our family's visits with her there were strained. But my husband and I persisted and gradually found ways for us all to enjoy spending time together again.

If you find yourself in a similar situation, grappling with how to help ease an older relative's transition into long-term care and remain supportive, here are some suggestions.

One of the best things you can do is share psychosocial information with staff to help them get to know your relative. Valuable facts might include birthplace and other places lived; family of origin; education; work history; successes, losses and other challenges; significant relationships; pastimes and skills; personality and coping style; cultural and religious background; values and beliefs; routines and habits; likes and dislikes; and what brings comfort when something upsetting occurs. (Respect your relative's privacy, though, regarding sensitive subjects.)

Such knowledge assists staff in seeing a unique person rather than simply someone with a set of physical needs (especially valuable if your relative is unable to communicate or disease has caused behavioral changes.) It also guides staff in individualizing the plan of care. In addition, they can use the information to initiate conversation, putting your relative at ease and building rapport; and to introduce him or her to residents with similar backgrounds or interests and match recreation programs to fit specific needs.

There are also many direct ways you can help your relative feel valued and connected to pre-admission life:

- Bring in possessions from home to personalize his or her room.
- Supply a large calendar with special occasions marked.
- Plan to visit when you're not rushed for time.
- Develop a regular visiting schedule so your relative knows when to expect you and can anticipate your next visit.
- Telephone between visits if you can't get in as often as you

- would like.
- Bring flowers from your garden or some favorite foods.
- Change room decorations to reflect the seasons and holidays.
- Actively listen to what your relative has to tell you.
- Show interest in his or her daily activities.
- Keep your relative informed about current events by supplying a radio or television or arranging for a newspaper subscription.
- Recreate routines from home, such as playing cards or watching a favorite TV program together.
- Encourage your relative to try some recreational programs or attend a resident council meeting.
- Join in yourself for special events.
- Keep your relative up-to-date on news about family and friends, and involve him or her in family decision-making.
- Notify family members and friends of the new address and phone number and encourage them to call, write or visit.
- Offer to join them for the first visit if they express anxiety.
- Bring your relative's or your pet in to visit (find out the home's policy first).
- Plan activities outside the residence. Go for a walk around the neighborhood or take a drive, for example.
- If your relative uses a wheelchair, register with the local accessible transportation service so you can take him or her to a restaurant, the mall or community events.
- If it's feasible, arrange for your relative to come home for a few hours.
- Continue to include him or her in family celebrations. If members' homes aren't accessible, choose a restaurant or banquet hall that is, or ask staff to help you plan a gathering onsite.
- Videotape or photograph events your relative is unable to attend, to share later. Be prepared that your relative may demonstrate considerable sadness, anxiety or anger at first. He or she will need time to grieve losses, which might include a house that holds fond memories, companions, pets, possessions and supportive neighbors, for example.

Some residents adjust to their new circumstances within a matter of weeks, while others can take months to accept the change in living arrangements and settle into their environment. Be patient. Keep showing up and reaching out.

If you're concerned your relative isn't adapting very well, consult with the staff social worker.

Lisa M. Petsche is a clinical social worker and a freelance writer specializing in family life and elder care issues.

Quantity & Motive

- the "how much" and "why" of giving

How much am I going to give? Why should I give? These are questions that go through my mind when someone asks me to give. Sometimes there is a conflict between my heart and my head, or from my perception of what is expected of me.

The Bible speaks clearly about the "how much" or quantity of giving and offers the tithe as a basic guideline, but also teaches about generous giving beyond the tithe. Before we get bogged down on "what" to give, I believe it is much more important to explore the "why" or motive of giving. In fact, I believe that the Bible is very clear about that – even when the tithe is introduced.

Let's briefly consider the "why" or motive for giving behind giving instances in the scriptures.

- The first offering – Cain and Abel. Why was Abel's offering accepted and not Cain's? Does it have to do with "what" they offered or with the "why" of the offering? I think that the contrast is more about the motive than what actually was brought. Abel sought to bring to God his best – so he put his heart into the offering. His heart was in the right place. Cain, it seems to me, was more casual.
- Consider Abram after he has successfully rescued Lot: Abram immediately gives a tithe when Melchizedek blesses him (Gen. 14:18-20).
- The Tabernacle building campaign: God instructs Moses to receive gifts only from those "whose heart prompts him to give" (Ex. 25: 2).
- The Temple building campaign: Consider David's heart and his grateful giving: he willingly opens up his treasury and his leaders respond in the same manner and willingly contribute precious gold, silver and precious stones for the building campaign for the temple (1Chron. 29). Consider the dominance of the words 'willing and willingly' in this chapter.
- The widow's offering: Consider how quantity and motive are entwined in Jesus' comments on the widow's gift: "*They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on*" (Mark 12:44).

So then, what about you and me? We do need to be practical when it comes to giving. We can't just give it all away, can we? Is that what Jesus expects, for instance, when he responded to the rich young ruler? (Matt. 19: 21) The answer would be "Yes" – at least in acknowledging that all we have is God's and that we are only stewards – then, yes, we assign all that we have for God's purposes.



Whether it is resources expended on family needs (Christian education or transportation, etc), it helps us have the right orientation when we recognize that it's God's resources that we have the privilege of using. As I make choices, I need to ask the question 'What would Jesus do' (remember the WWJD arm bracelets that were popular at one time?). That is as applicable in all that I do with my resources as what I set aside for charitable giving.

Giving is a special act that is enabled by faithful stewardship. By making wise and cost effective choices that reflect durability, value and energy efficiency, we also maximize what we can set aside for charitable giving.

Once we have the motive for giving right – not based on obligation or duty but rather driven by heartfelt gratitude and a desire to honor God, to express love for God and neighbor – then giving becomes a blessing. It drives us to give generously especially when a need arises – beyond the scriptural teaching of tithing and proportional giving. It is because God's grace is so generous – so deep and wide and high and long – that it took God's gift of his only son, our Savior, to pay for it. God gave and he still gives today – generously to his children. In committing your giving acknowledge as David did:

"But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this... O Lord... keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you." (1Chron. 29: 14, 18)

Stewardly Tip: Use the biblical tithe as your starting point for giving. Include your church first (you are its steward, after all) and then other Christian charities that work in some aspect of God's Kingdom work. CSS has over 40 Christian Partners that we highly recommend for your giving consideration.

Readers: Share your 'Stewardly Tips' so that we all can make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Submit your suggestions (by mail to *Christian Courier* or by email to my address below) and provide your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or ask you for more details.

Next issue: RRSPs/RRIFs

Rick DeGraaf works for Christian Stewardship Services in Markham, Ontario
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Church

Every third day India's Christians face assaults, says church leader

By Anto Akkara

Bangalore, India (ENI) – "Despite being a 'secular democratic republic', India is still 'not a very safe place for its tiny Christian minority,' says a report released by a top official in the All India Christian Council.

The Christian community faced at least one crime against it every third day during 2006, with a total of 128 cases recorded in the media, said the report compiled by John Dayal, general secretary of the council.

"The figure may actually be much higher," said Dayal in the introduction to his "Unofficial White Paper on Violence Against Christians in India – 2006." The report noted that Christians account for only 2.3 percent of India's 1.2 billion people.

Dayal said most of the listed incidents were compiled from Web sites of Christian groups, as mainline media, especially the Hindi language national media, "ignores acts of violence against minority communities in general and the Christians in particular."

The list contains only the "more vicious crimes," cross-checked with "credible newspaper reports and police files," said Dayal. He noted, however, that church workers, including pastors, priest and nuns

and development NGOs, "often do not even report acts of violence unless there is a grave injury."

The report, which was compiled with the support of church council members, "also does not include the hundreds of cases of official harassment of schools, colleges,

hospitals, churches, mission stations and house churches in most states," he said.

The state of Madhya Pradesh in central India, ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has faced accusations of Hindu nationalist leanings, had the highest number of violent acts against Christians in 2006, Dayal told Ecumenical News International. He pointed out, however, that states



Ceylon Christian Care Church in South India

controlled by the secular Congress party "are not far behind."

The southern Andhra Pradesh state ruled by the Congress party with the government led by Chief Minister Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, who belongs to the Church of South India, had witnessed the murder of four pastors during 2006, said Dayal.

Armenian church leader says killing journalist will not kill cause

Antelias, Lebanon (ENI) – The former moderator of the World Council of Churches, Catholicos Aram I of the Armenian Apostolic Church, has condemned the assassination of Hrant Dink, a Turkish journalist of Armenian descent, who was the editor-in-chief of the bilingual weekly newspaper Agos in Turkey. "Hrant Dink was a man of faith and vision. He was a committed journalist who had the courage to question all attempts depicting the Armenian Genocide, the first genocide of the 20th century as a 'fiction' or 'alleged,'" said Aram, Catholicos of Cilicia, whose headquarters are at Antelias in Lebanon.

Aram said Dink had courageously challenged the present-day Turkey to recognize the mass killing of Armenians in 1915, which, Aram said, had been planned and executed by the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

"In fact, one cannot kill the truth by physically killing the messenger of it. One cannot silence the voice of justice by neutralizing its advocate," said Aram in a January 22 statement. "The Armenian cause is a cause of justice. The sons of the one and a half million Armenian martyrs will continue their non-violent struggle for justice."

The press service of the Armenian Church said a special memorial service for Dink would be held on January 28 in all Armenian churches, including the main cathedral of Etchmiadzin in Armenia.

Dink was through his Armenian-Turkish newspaper a vehement critic of abuses of human rights in Turkey and his death generated a strong reaction in many parts of the world and protests in his own country. Turkish police said two suspects had been arrested.

Turkey denies 1.5 million Armenians died in a systematic genocide in the early 20th century, and in 2006 Dink was given a six-month suspended jail sentence for "insulting Turkey's identity."

Human rights watchers say 18 journalists have been killed in Turkey in the last six years, and 77 are on trial.

Russian Orthodox Church unhappy with Ukrainian president's plan

By Sophia Kishkovsky

Moscow (ENI) – The Russian Orthodox Church says it is displeased with recent comments made by Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko calling for the creation of a committee to work on the unification of Ukrainian churches, which are riven by historical and canonical differences. "The persistence of Viktor Yushchenko in the creation of a 'unified local church' with the active participation of representatives of the state elicits bewilderment," an official of the Moscow Patriarchate's department of external church relations told Russia's Interfax news agency on January 15.

The Rev. Nikolai Balashov, the department's secretary for inter-Orthodox relations, said Yushchenko had started his presidency

on a positive note, with a visit to Patriarch Alexei II of the Russian Orthodox Church and a promise not to interfere in Ukraine's complicated church affairs.

"But now the head of a state that is, by its constitution, secular, is not only formulating his own program regarding the future of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, but is making concrete proposals on how many bishops and priests should be in a 'joint theological commission', the goal of which is to create a new church," said Balashov.

At a meeting on January 12 with leaders of the Kiev Patriarchate, a church that is not recognized by any of the world's canonical Orthodox churches, Yushchenko proposed the creation of a commission made up of three bishops and two priests each from

the Kiev Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate.

"Only by uniting can we place great tasks before our selves," Interfax quoted Yushchenko as saying.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate accused the Ukrainian president of "attempting to resolve church issues with the help of political methods," the Kommersant Ukraina newspaper reported.

Many in Ukraine regard the Kiev Patriarchate as a symbol of the country's independence, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is often seen as loyal to Moscow. The division has resulted in bitter accusations and conflicts over church property.

Dutch Protestants cooperate on aid, but divided on Israel, Palestine

By Andreas Havinga

Utrecht, Netherlands (ENI) – The Protestant development aid program Kerkinactie has left the national platform of Dutch peace and development organizations advocating a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The decision of Kerkinactie to end its membership of United Civilians for Peace (UCP) was announced on December 22 and took effect on January 1.

Kerkinactie, formerly known as Kerken in actie (Churches in action), was a founder member of UCP, set up in 2001 as a national platform of six major peace and development organizations, five of them church-related.

Kerkinactie's withdrawal from the UCP coincides with the start-up of a joint staffing structure of Kerkinactie and the Inter-Church

Organization for Development Co-operation (ICCO). The new organization, known as ICCO/Kerkinactie, is referred to by the two partners as a "joint operational organisation" but it falls short of being a merger.

The synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands gave its go-ahead for the joint structure in November on the condition that Kerkinactie's work in the Middle East would remain apart from that of ICCO.

The secretariat of UCP is based in the offices of ICCO, which in turn are located in the national office building of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

The Protestant Church, which organizes some activities under the header "Church and Israel," describes its relationship with Israel as essential to its own identity and confession

of faith. The church's constitution refers to its link with the Jewish people as one of "non-relinquishing solidarity."

In a December 22 statement, Kerkinactie said that the UCP initially provided information about the occupied Palestinian territories by sending observers. "These activities were very valuable in drawing attention to the situation in the Middle East." In its statement, however, it said: "In the opinion of Kerkinactie, too little attention was given to the necessity of security for all peoples in the region, including Israel itself. This caused the UCP to quickly gain the reputation of being 'one-sidedly pro-Palestinian'.

This reputation means that, in the opinion of Kerkinactie, UCP cannot be sufficiently effective in its advocacy and lobbying work."

It noted: "Kerkinactie has much appreciation for the obvious dedication and integrity of UCP and for this reason has cooperated whole-heartedly in the UCP over the past years." Kerkinactie signalled that it remains willing to cooperate in future UCP projects on a case-by-case basis. Kerkinactie is the program for missionary and diaconal work of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the second largest church body in the country. Ten smaller churches and ecumenical organizations belong to it.

The UCP was founded in 2001 by the Protestant Kerkinactie and ICCO; the Roman Catholic Cordaid and Pax Christi; the ecumenical Inter-Church Peace Council (IKV); and the secular group Oxfam Novib.

Church**African church leaders say theology can help continental renewal**

By Fredrick Nzwili

Nairobi (ENI) – Bishop Mvume Dandala, the general secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches has reiterated his continent's will and ability for renewal during a speech at the 2nd World Forum on Theology and Liberation in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. "In welcoming these guests in Africa, we want to remind them we believe this is the time for renewal of our continent," the African church leader told Ecumenical News International at the Carmelite Centre in Nairobi at the start of the January forum.

About 350 theologians and other Christians from around the world have converged on the centre to reflect on "Spirituality for another possible World", with their deliberations and proposals to be sent to the World Social Forum starting in Nairobi on January 20.

Opening the forum, Dandala, a Methodist from South Africa, said churches were fully conscious of the pain in the Horn of Africa,

particularly Somalia. There, Ethiopian army-backed Transitional Federal Government forces have ousted the Union of Islamic Courts, which had earlier seized power, but this has created new insecurity and problems relating to displacement of people. "The pain in that country has been caused by many years of human greed, material things as well as for political power," said Dandala.

Debates at the forum will centre on theology and liberation reflecting on faith and solidarity practices, while analyzing social, political, economic and religious issues. Organizers said the forum aims to show that the poor and those who fight with them, inspired by religious belief, contribute to the building of a new world.

"We hope that religion and spirituality will help to strengthen the construction of a better world," said Roman Catholic nun, Sister Ephigenia Gachiri, a Kenyan theologian who delivered a keynote address on January 16.

Evangelical pastor 'shot dead' in Sri Lanka

By Anto Akkara

Bangalore, India (ENI) – An evangelical pastor, Nallathamby Gnanaseelan, who leads the Tamil Mission Church in Jaffna, was shot dead by Sri Lankan security personnel in the troubled Tamil heartland of northern Jaffna. The Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka said in a statement that the 38-year-old pastor was shot dead after taking his wife and daughter to a hospital on January 13.

The statement noted that Gnanaseelan was shot in the stomach and in the head, and that his Bible, bag, identity card and motorcycle were taken away and he was left alone on the road. The security forces first claimed he had been carrying explosives but later said he was shot because "he failed to stop" when challenged by security personnel.

US Episcopalians begin legal battle linked to gay clergy fight

By Cheryl Heckler

Oxford, Ohio (ENI) – The US Episcopal Church's diocese of Virginia is preparing for an all-out legal battle over the ownership of the property in 11 parishes that broke away from the denomination over its tolerance of homosexual clergy. The case involves two of the oldest, largest and most prominent parishes in Virginia and pits church members against the diocese in a struggle over property valued at about US\$25 million.

In December, members of the 11 parishes, including the historic Truro Church and The Falls Church, where founding US president George Washington once worshiped, voted to leave the Episcopal Church and affiliated themselves with the (Anglican) Church of Nigeria.

The diocese and the parishes, however, agreed to delay legal action for 30 days. That agreement expired on January 17.

The following day, Bishop Peter Lee and the executive board of the diocese of

"This is outrageous," Godfrey Yogarajah, general secretary of the evangelical alliance, told Ecumenical News International on January 18, from Colombo. Yogarajah noted that the pastor's killing is "not an isolated incident". He added, "This reflects the grave human rights abuses in the island."

Santha Fernando, spokesperson for the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, told ENI: "The situation is so bad even pastors aren't safe." Fernando pointed out that Gnanaseelan is not the first religious figure to suffer at the hands of the security forces. According to Fernando, a Roman Catholic priest, Thiruchelvam Nihal Jim Brown, from Allaippiddy near Jaffna, went missing in August along with layperson Wenceslaus Vincent after his church had been earlier shelled by Sri Lankan forces.

Virginia declared the land and buildings held by the 11 parishes to be legally "abandoned" and said they would go to court to recover and protect the property.

The denomination's presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, released a statement on 21 January saying that parishes "cannot unilaterally disestablish themselves or remove themselves from a diocese. By canon law, property of all sorts held by parishes is held and must be used for the mission of the Episcopal Church through diocesan bishops and governing bodies."

She also said the Church of Nigeria has no claim to the property. "Ancient precedent in the Church requires bishops to respect diocesan boundaries, and to refrain from crossing into or acting officially in dioceses other than their own," Jefferts Schori said.

The Episcopal Church has been under pressure since the 2003 consecration of V. Gene Robinson, a divorced father living openly with another man, as a bishop in New Hampshire.

Atheists challenge the religious right

Jane Lampman

For some time, the religious right has decried "secular humanism," a philosophy that rejects the supernatural or spiritual as a basis for moral decision making. But now, nonbelievers are vigorously fighting back. Only a small percentage of Americans admit to being nontheists (between 2 and 9 percent, depending on the poll), but that equates to many millions. And religionists' role in debates over stem-cell research and evolution vs. intelligent design – as well as radical religion in world conflicts – have galvanized some atheists to mount a counteroffensive.

In bestselling books, on websites, and with a national lobbying effort, atheists and other nontheists are challenging the growing religious influence in government and public life. Some are attacking the foundations of religion itself.

Two particularly provocative books, in fact, hit the top of Publishers Weekly's religion bestseller list in December. No. 1, *The God Delusion*, by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and No. 2, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, by writer Sam Harris, are no-holds-barred, antireligion polemics that call for the eradication of all manifestations of faith.

"I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented," declares Dr. Dawkins, the famed Oxford professor who wrote *The Selfish Gene*.

These offerings are so intolerant of religion of any kind – liberal, moderate, or fundamentalist – that some scientists and secularists have critiqued their peers for oversimplification and for a secular fundamentalism.

"They undermine their own case by writing in a language that suffers from many things they say are true of believers – intolerance, disrespect, extremism," says Alan Wolfe, a professor of religion at Boston College, who is a secularist and author of several books on American religious perspectives.

Yet the authors are anything but modest about their efforts to supplant faith with pure scientific rationality. While critics point out that religion is a genuine reflection of people's experience and will always exist, Mr. Harris suggests it could be equated with slavery, which once was widely acceptable, but eventually was looked upon with horror. He sees it as responsible for many of life's tragedies.

Harris first hit the bestseller bull's-eye in 2004 with *The End of Faith*, and he says the responses to that book, particularly those from Christians, spurred his latest epistle.

A mere 96 pages, *Letter* may be dismissed by many for its condescending tone or overheated rhetoric. Yet its bold arguments offer a useful window into nontheist perspectives and could also startle some

complacent religionists into a rethinking and refining of perceptions.

Many nontheists don't share this militant perspective, but have decided that keeping silent in religious America no longer makes sense. They are astonished that a majority of Americans question evolution and support teaching intelligent design in the science classroom. They are distressed over polls that show that at least half of Americans are unwilling to vote for an atheist despite the Constitution's requirement that there be no religious test for public office. And they contend that in recent years, Congress has passed bills and the president has issued executive orders that have privileged religion in inappropriate and unconstitutional ways.

As a result, seven organizations of nontheists – including atheists, freethinkers, humanists, and agnostics – began the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), a lobby seeking to increase the visibility and respectability of nontheistic viewpoints in the United States.

"In some parts of the country, children are ostracized if someone finds out their families are atheists," says Lori Lipman Brown, SCA director. "We need to educate the public that people who don't have a god belief can be good neighbors and friends and moral and ethical people."

They also intend to stand up vigorously for their rights. "Some people want to go back to a time when religion was imposed, such as official prayer in public schools," she adds. "For someone to say they can't practice their religion appropriately if all schoolchildren are not required to recite a public prayer is very disturbing."

The SCA intends to lobby the new U.S. Congress to override a presidential veto on stem-cell research and to repeal land-use legislation and other laws seen as "privileging one religion over other religions or over those who don't follow religion."

Still, the group makes clear on its website that while it promotes reason and science as the bases for policymaking, it also supports religious tolerance.

Harris and Dawkins make it clear that they think faith has gotten off too easy for too long. Their books have spurred widespread commentary, much of it a strong critique of their arguments and lack of religious knowledge. But in a culture immersed in combativeness in politics and the media, the intemperate books are selling well.

Yet one critic, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, calls for a truce: "We've suffered enough from religious intolerance that the last thing the world needs is irreligious intolerance."

Jane Lampman is a writer for The Christian Science Monitor

Friendship

About Friends

Frank DeVries

It is a good thing to have a caring friend who understands you, who will always listen to you, and who will encourage you whenever you are sad or troubled.

I have a friend. His name is John. John has been my friend for ages. Although over time our paths diverged in some ways, basically our relationship is the same as it was some fifty-odd years ago. As we did then, still today we are able to discuss almost anything and everything theological, philosophical or even quirky. Discourse with John is always easy for we share many of the same interests, and we both readily burst out laughing about our own or others' outlandish ideas or bizarre extrapolations. But although the talks are fun and parrying goes back and forth, they are always grounded in a deep understanding of what the other is about. At the risk of sounding pietistic, we both share a deep love for the Lord. And in some form or other this shared love is always and ever the basis, the core of any discussion. We have a good friendship.

I think it is important for everyone, at any stage of life, to have a good friend. As the saying goes, a faraway friend is better than a close neighbor. When I was very young I had a friend by the name of Steef. Steef Noomen. Steef lived about three blocks from where I lived. In the main street of our town my parents had a cigar/cigarette store with a library annex. Because we mostly sold our cigars singly, up in the attic we had hundreds upon hundreds of empty cigar boxes, small boxes made of very light (balsa?) wood. Often Steef would come over and together we would construct huge buildings that we would crawl into and send crashing down without running the risk of getting hurt - unless one of the tiny box-cover nails happened to leave its mark.

When I was around 10 years old I had another friend. His name was Dickie. Three other friends plus Dickie and I had formed a club called "The Paddle Boys." Together we played games and embarked upon all sorts of activities. One summer we had a bug collection made up of dead flies, wasps, ants, beetles and various other jolly critters. I was in charge of that project, and with pins and identifying tags I pricked that dead mini-zoo up on a large piece of cardboard. When the cardboard was full I recall taking it home and stowing it behind a dresser in my bedroom until such a time that my Mom wondered whence this strange smell originated.

To be sure, the members of "The Paddle Boys" club had no canoes, and were also short on paddles. Still, we figured that at some time in the near future we would definitely acquire both vessels and accoutrements, and go paddling around in the Holland canals having all manner of dangerous adventures. We also had a large box, a little bit like a refrigerator box except it wasn't

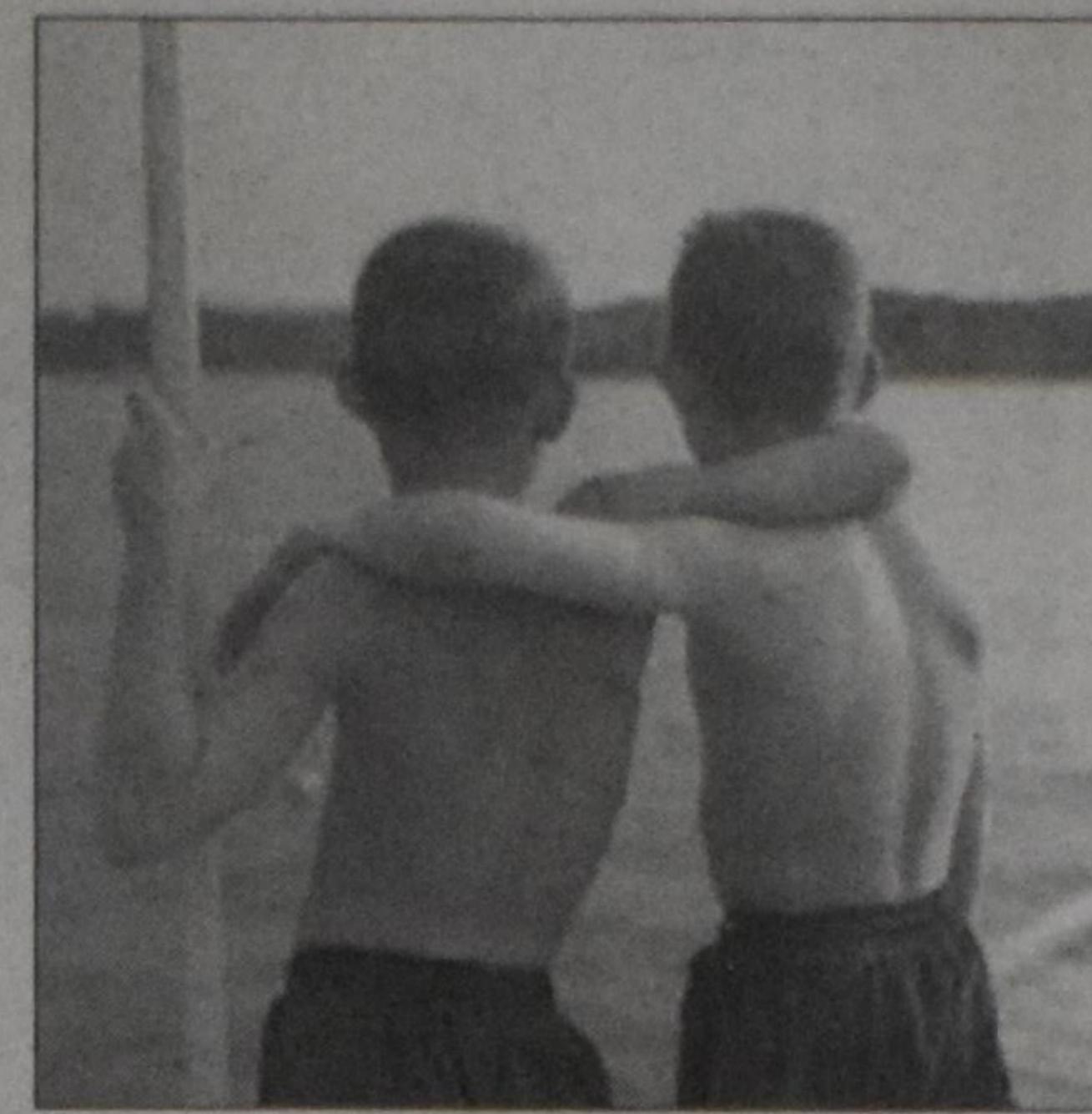
a refrigerator box because refrigerators either hadn't been invented yet or had not yet been imported into Holland. But it was a large box, and at one time it was decided by the members of the club that Dickie and I were to go sit in the box, side by side, and be a radio. On Dickie's side somebody had made a hole on the side of the box and put a stick in it. Dickie was to hang on to that stick. When that somebody or some other somebody would yank on it Dickie would give me a push and I would start singing. I have always been a little slow.

Although we Paddle Boys were basically a good bunch, we sometimes used bad language. Still, decent dudes that we were, we decided it important to monitor such linguistic lapses. We thought this monitoring needed to be done especially when in the company of others, and should be undertaken whenever anyone of us would descend into the murky realm of unbecoming language. So as not to embarrass the guilty member, yet to point out to him in a stealthy yet brotherly manner the error of his ways, we decided that anyone of us could then reprimand him by innocuously speaking a sentence with the word "spider web" in it. Thus, if one kid would do a nasty, one of us would quickly say something like, "Hey, look at that spider web in the corner there!" Upon hearing the phrase the sinner would immediately stop in his tracks, his face would turn red with the guilt and shame of it all, and he would burst out in tears. Or so the theory went. Just to be sure that we had all this down pat we practised the system a lot. Yes, ultimately we Paddle Boys functioned at a high level of sanctification.

My friend Wim

Older still, I had a fine friend by the name of Wim. Wim was the best student in our high school class. He had a large crop of blond, wavy hair. I was always jealous of that large crop of blond, wavy hair. Now I was a member of the AZC, the local junior water polo team. When competing, all members of the team sported a blue cap with the letters AZC printed on the front. One night I thought I'd give myself a nice wavy crop of hair, too, making it look just like Wim's. I made my hair soaking wet, and with my fingers craftily created a pattern of waves with each wave going into a direction opposite to the previous wave that was laid. When done I gently fitted my AZC cap over top of the entire carefully coiffed contraption, trusting that in the morning I'd wake up with waves in my hair which, if not looking exactly like Wim's, at least would look somewhat like those in my Mom's latest perm.

It didn't happen. Upon awakening I looked in the mirror where the first thing I saw was a sleepy head covered by a blue AZC cap. Suddenly recalling my clever plan I gingerly removed the cap and voila: those poor straight little hairs of mine having sat there all cramped up during the night, sud-



denly freed, sprung into action with wild abandon and managed to spread out in a horrendous, hairy halo that made me look like a cross between David Ben-Gurion and a chimney brush on steroids.

Wim and I played Monopoly a lot. Well I recall how often, selflessly, I offered to be the holder of the bank. By virtue of that preeminent position I usually found a way to steal some of the hundreds from the bank to place them sneakily either on top of my own pile of hundreds, or temporarily stash them under the board to be retrieved at a time of financial duress. I liked to be at Wim's, because up at his house they also had a loft like we had, and Wim had hundreds of lead soldiers. We would play there and evenly divide the soldiers into two armies. Each armed with a two-inch steel ball-bearing, we would in turn try to topple as many of the opponent's soldiers as we could. Wim was a good friend. But, you may ask by now, what actually makes for a good friend?

What do you expect from a friend?

I used to be a school teacher and at one time asked precisely that question of the students in my grade 7 class: what do you expect a true friend to be? The answers came fast and furious: a true friend has to be totally loyal, one you can trust, who can keep a secret, is dependable, compassionate, understanding, giving, helping, caring, tolerant, one to whom you can tell anything and everything.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it does contain a number of the characteristics I recall the kids volunteering, and which I had written on the board. I invited the class to look them over one more time and everybody agreed that yes, these were the qualities they expected their friend to have.

But then I asked them this: if these were the qualities they expected their friends to have, would it then not be reasonable to expect their friends to have the same expectations about *them*? Silence. Sheepish looks and embarrassed glances and half-smiles....

Joseph Scriven's friend

Joseph Scriven had a friend with all the qualities listed above, and more. Born in

1819, Joseph saw first light in the small town of Banbridge, Ireland. The river Bann ran through the center of town, a bridge connecting the two sides of it. Joseph was not especially good-looking - Charles Dickens might well have described him as having an "unprepossessing exterior." Joseph was a loner in High school, did not associate much with the other boys, and did not date. Interestingly, during his last years in High school a new girl moved into town. The girl had an exceptionally nice personality and was exceptionally nice to look at to boot. All the boys wanted to date her - but she was not interested.

One time, on the way home from school, the girl fell into step with Joseph. As they walked and talked a liking for each other quickly developed between them. The girl lived on the other side of the river, and therefore they parted by the bridge. However, soon after people saw them together often, and in due time Joseph and his new friend declared their love for each other. One thing led to another, and so it happened they made plans to marry, the wedding to take place the day before Christmas.

It was winter, bitterly cold, and the river was frozen over. On the evening before the big event was to take place, the girl wanted to discuss with her husband-to-be some or other item regarding the wedding. Rather than walking around to the bridge she took a shortcut crossing the river over the ice. Sadly, in so doing, and in the dark, she came across a section of thin ice, fell through, and drowned.

A number of years later, at the age of 25 Joseph Scriven emigrated to Canada, and settled near Rice Lake, close to Port Hope, a small town on Lake Ontario. On one occasion he went back to Ireland for a visit, but never having been popular with his classmates he was not made to feel welcome. In 1886, at the age of 67, Joseph Scriven died. He lies buried in the Port Hope cemetery.

After his passing some of his friends went through his meager belongings, amongst which they found a poem Joseph had written. Dated 1855, it had three verses. The first two verses were written with the same pen, the third verse with a different one; clearly it had been added later, most likely after his trip to Ireland. Knowing something about Joseph's life his friends were deeply moved by the poem, and one of them, a musician of sorts, put it to music. Subsequently translated into many languages, Joseph Scriven's poem *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* has become one of the best loved hymns of all time, is found in almost every hymnal, and has been a source of inspiration and encouragement to untold millions.

It is a good thing to have a caring friend who understands you, who will always listen to you, and who will encourage you whenever you are sad or troubled.

Ecclesiastes

Wisdom is not a prattler nor is it silent

*Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious,
but a fool is consumed by his own lips.*

*At the beginning his words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness -
and the fool multiplies words.*

*No one knows what is coming -
who can tell him what will happen after him?*
Ecclesiastes 10:12-14

A. A. van Ruler

When we say that the fool uses many words, this does not imply that everyone who uses many words is a fool. Nor does it mean that everyone who keeps his mouth shut is wise.

In this context it is important to take a person's temperament and character into account. Whether a person does or doesn't talk a lot isn't just a matter of insight and conviction, foolishness or wisdom. There are those who are born talking. It's impossible to shut them up. Gathering their thoughts and expressing them seems to require no effort whatsoever. All they need is an audience, and they start talking.

Then there are those who from birth on say very little. They themselves don't know why, but they seem to have no need to say much. It takes too much effort.

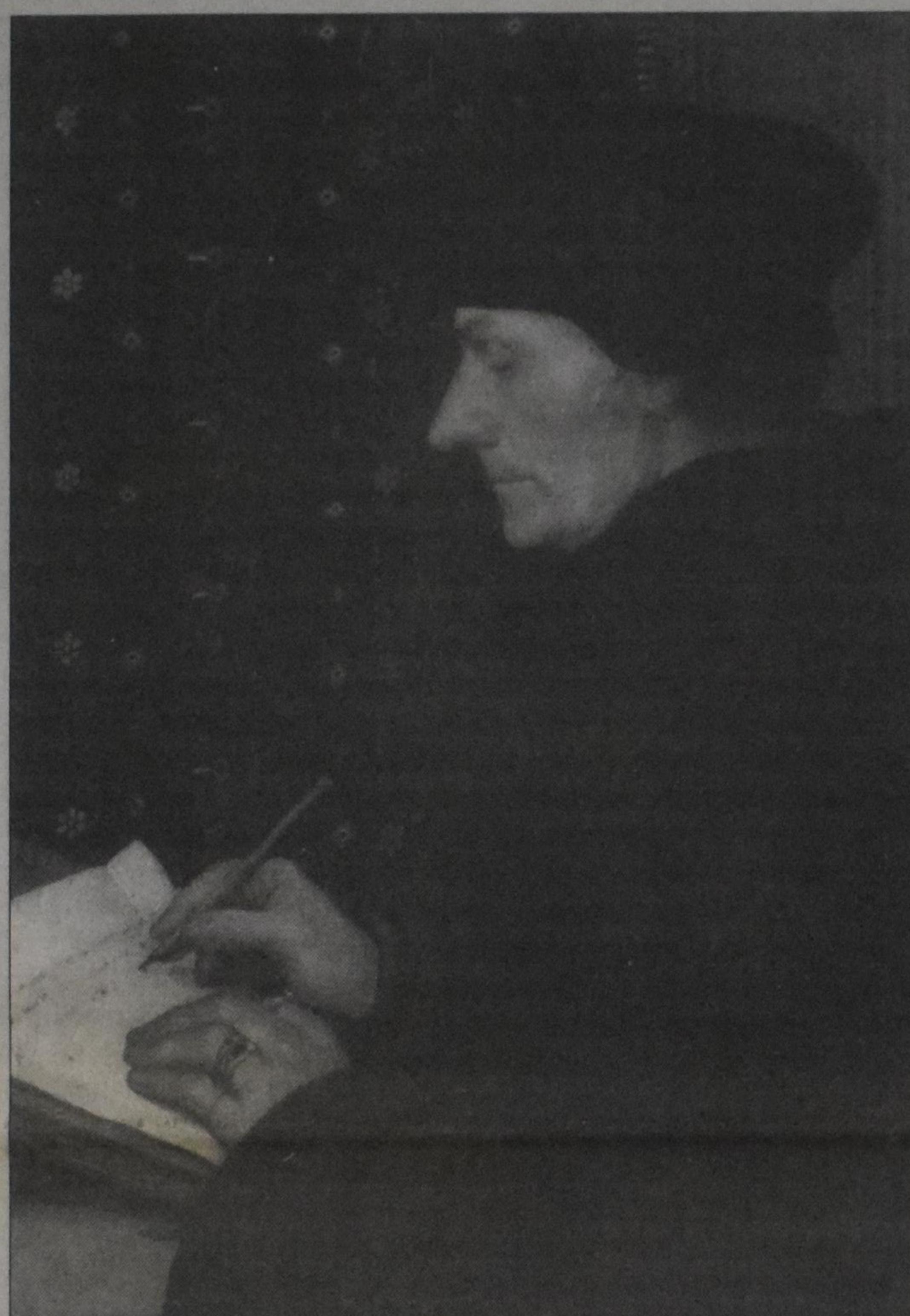
Such differences in human nature have to be taken into account. Such differences can be beautiful. Or they can give rise to conflict.

But the Preacher isn't talking about such differences in temperament and character. He is plumbing deeper into the puzzling phenomenon of folly in this world. There are those in this world whom we are forced to judge as foolish. To say this of someone is awful. After all, we are talking about fellow human beings! But it is even more awful that it is true that some people are indeed foolish.

In fact, the Preacher seems to be convinced that the great majority of people in the world are foolish. True or not, it is the existence of folly that sets him to thinking. And he wants to look deeper into this strange phenomenon. He describes different facets of foolishness. One of the hallmarks of the fool is that he multiplies words. He prattles on endlessly.

This is because the fool thinks he is wise, says the Preacher: he thinks he knows everything, that he possesses insight and good judgment and can therefore participate in any and all discussions. This is one more sign of the terrible disorder that we call folly.

If the fool would only realize that he is a fool, at least that would make sense. On the other hand, that would



Erasmus by Hans Holbein. Erasmus wrote In Praise of Folly in 1509, a tongue-in-cheek praise of many forms of human foolishness, including those of scholars like himself and of the Roman Catholic church, of which he remained a faithful member. To his embarrassment, it became one of his most popular books.

also land us in disorder, for if the fool realized he was foolish, then in this respect he would no longer be foolish but wise. Part of his folly is to think himself wise.

So folly turns everything upside-down. In our folly we suffer to some extent from a corruption of meaning. There is something demonic about all folly. In God everything fits together, it makes sense. In the devil nothing fits together, the world becomes a system of contradictions.

Once a person gets caught up in the contradictions of folly, which suggest that he is wise, then it becomes hard for him to keep his mouth shut. He is like the student who thinks he knows the answer to the questions posed by the teacher: he feels compelled to answer. His hand shoots up to attract the teacher's attention, and he may even blurt out the answer before he is even asked. It spouts to the surface like oil in a gusher. Thinking that he knows and understands, he feels an irresistible need to speak up.

Whatever the case, he wants to join in the discussion. Here he sits – in the company of others who are talking about all kinds of things. Whether this is a company of wise or foolish people is beside the point. They are talking to one another. That's what people do when they get together. People also eat together and play together. Perhaps these are even better ways of socializing than talking, but it would be very unnatural for human beings to be together in complete silence. Human beings talk

when they get together. And they talk about something.

At least, that's what we do if we haven't been completely deprived of our senses. In contemporary culture there is an increasing tendency to deny any connection between reality and the human mind and therefore the possibility of talking meaningfully about things. Although we continue to talk, we're talking about nothing. What we say does not have to make sense. It does not have to jibe. We can say whatever we like. As I see it, if we follow this path, we will soon find ourselves in hell in the company of the devil.

Fortunately we never go this far. Most of us still try to speak meaningful words about particular things, and we are saved from the madness of complete formlessness by the meaningfulness of those words and the particularity of things.

However, when a fool takes part in such a conversation, he thinks he knows what the others are talking about. If he is completely foolish, he thinks that he has the latest and most accurate word on the matter at hand, and usually he does not hesitate to speak up.

Sometimes he can become quite irritating and obnoxious, for the company recognizes the foolishness of his words. But usually they fail to see him as a mirror, and to see in him their own foolishness. In fact, most of us use his folly to bask in our own wisdom. This makes us equally foolish.

Not that this isn't understandable. It is very unpleasant for those of us who are wise to see our own folly. And it is no less pleasant for the foolish to be sitting in a company of people who are discussing something he knows nothing about. Truth be told, none of us relish that.

Isn't the world actually a large company of people discussing things that, when it really comes down to it, they know nothing about? Man has no idea what is going on, says the Preacher. He does experience events: they happen to him; in fact, he is what happens. We are ourselves that which is happening; we are historical reality.

But are they transparent to us? Do we know the why and the what of things, where they come from and where they are going? Can we tie all the pieces together? Can we discern the light of reason in this reality? Or if this is asking too much, can we oversee reality in its totality?

Of course we can't. How can we know what will happen after we are gone? Reality is not yet finished. Things are still happening. The world will go on after we are gone. By definition no one can know everything.

Only when we begin to realize our fundamental ignorance about being do we become wise. This leads us to a learned ignorance. And that enables us to keep our mouths shut. In fact, then keeping silent takes no effort at all. Those who see being as it is and the condition of mankind within it lose the desire to turn themselves into a verbal waterfall.

But does it render us completely speechless? Does it condemn us to a holy silence? Not according to Scripture. In the beginning was the Word. The living God is a God who speaks. Each and every created thing is a word. The whole of reality is speech. Being was spoken by God, and it must also be spoken by man.

But we are not up to the task. And the wise realize as much. But for precisely this reason they will not take refuge in silence. Silence, too, is a form of the demonic. The wise will take refuge in the Word of God and they will be persons of few words. They will, however, try to make these words truly be words – words of truth and of life.

The enemy ...continued from page 6

history and the Bible show that by God's grace evil and societal collapse can be overcome even when that seems hopeless.

If it is true that our main problem lies at the spiritual roots of our culture, then the way out must be found in spiritual and moral renewal. Hopefully, the reports of a revival of the Christian faith in Europe (see sidebar on p. 6) are signs of a genuine renewal that will help turn the tide.

Could it be that God has in store a better future for our children than we fear in our darkest moments?

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Church

Overcoming isolation: artificial clusters

Greetcha reached for the second teacup. High overhead, so high that Greetcha's tiptoe stretch barely reaches the tiny handles, three teacups reside inside an antique mahogany cupboard. Not Luan mahogany, the real thing. In fact, both the cupboard and the cups date from the early 1800's when



Greetcha: "Artificial klosters? Dat is not de real thing dan? Like store-buied cookies?"

Asian mahogany was both Asian *and* mahogany. Captain Jon Van Der Zee, her oldest known relative, sailed the fabled *Groene Draek* from Amsterdam to Hong Kong.

These cups had traveled from Hong Kong to London and then to Amsterdam and finally to KikvorsKolk where Greetcha's family originated. They had become the family's greatest treasure.

It was from these same cups that Dominees Vrijling and Groenhuis sipped tea long before the breakaway from the state church. Great things were decided over these cups.

Today the best wool table cloths covered the parlor table, protecting the modest table beneath from the delicate teacups and the plates of rusks and cheeses. Greetcha has brushed it clean a hundred times or more and then floated her tatted tablecloth gently onto the surface.

Younger sister Mary, born after the family emigrated from Holland, eventually arrived to help Greetcha finish her preparations.

Soon enough the three dominees arrived – Pastors Bob and Ben and Jerry, the executive and administrative committee for Classis Center City. Though Mary was an elder in her own right and could have joined the parlor pastors, she was content to sip coffee from the Melamine cup in the kitchen until she and Greetcha were called.

Eventually Pastor Jerry called, "Ladies, now it's time for a woman's opinion about LandsEnd church. Please join us."

Greetcha and Mary recoiled slightly at the thought of a "woman's" opinion being somehow added at the last minute, but complied without comment.

"So what are your thoughts about LandsEnd CRC? Should we fund LandsEnd with more money from Classis and apply for a Lilly Grant to keep it going another year? Or close it down?"

Those were the options for LandsEnd.

LandsEnd was now ten years old and its membership was about sixty persons, total. Only eighteen families were members, most of them converts from the neighborhood.

Only Elder DeVries was born into the CRC.

Money was tight and calling a pastor was impossible. Besides, in this time of insufficient pastors, what incentive would draw a capable pastor to LandsEnd CRC?

Pastor Bob, Mary and Greetcha had already heard the tale of disappointment and hurt from the decade of ministry that had generated the small congregation. They knew the love and devotion that were unanswered in the ministry.

Mary wondered if there were other options: "Either we give them money for another two years, or we close them down."

Greetcha's eyes looked for her treasured cups in the hands of three men in open-collared shirts, cotton pants and deck shoes. She recalled her visions of a stout seafaring grandfather and of sturdy Holland dominees considering life, death, Scripture and faithfulness. Those were times of great men making great decisions for all of Holland.

Now Greetcha wondered if Pastor Bob and his young colleagues were worthy of her precious cups.

While this quintet hammers out a decision for LandsEnd, let's take a look at the issues surrounding about 10 to 20 per cent of CRCNA congregations – the Premature Membership Plateau.

The Premature Membership Plateau

LandsEnd represents the real and most painful problem in church planting – the small church in a "premature membership plateau." For the record, a premature membership plateau is not a biblical term. Rather, it is the common experience in which a new church reaches a membership size which is far less than the desired membership size and then maintains that size for a decade or more for reasons that are not always understood.

The graph of a premature membership plateau is, of course, flat, because the congregation reaches a size and then stops growing.

Premature

All churches will plateau at some point. All of them. The only question is when the plateau will occur. Premature suggests that both the growing time and also the numeric goal for membership were not met. The membership growth was arrested before an expected size was attained.

Membership

The number of active, participating full members. Among CRC plantings that experience this premature plateau, the membership level is usually near one hundred souls.

Plateau

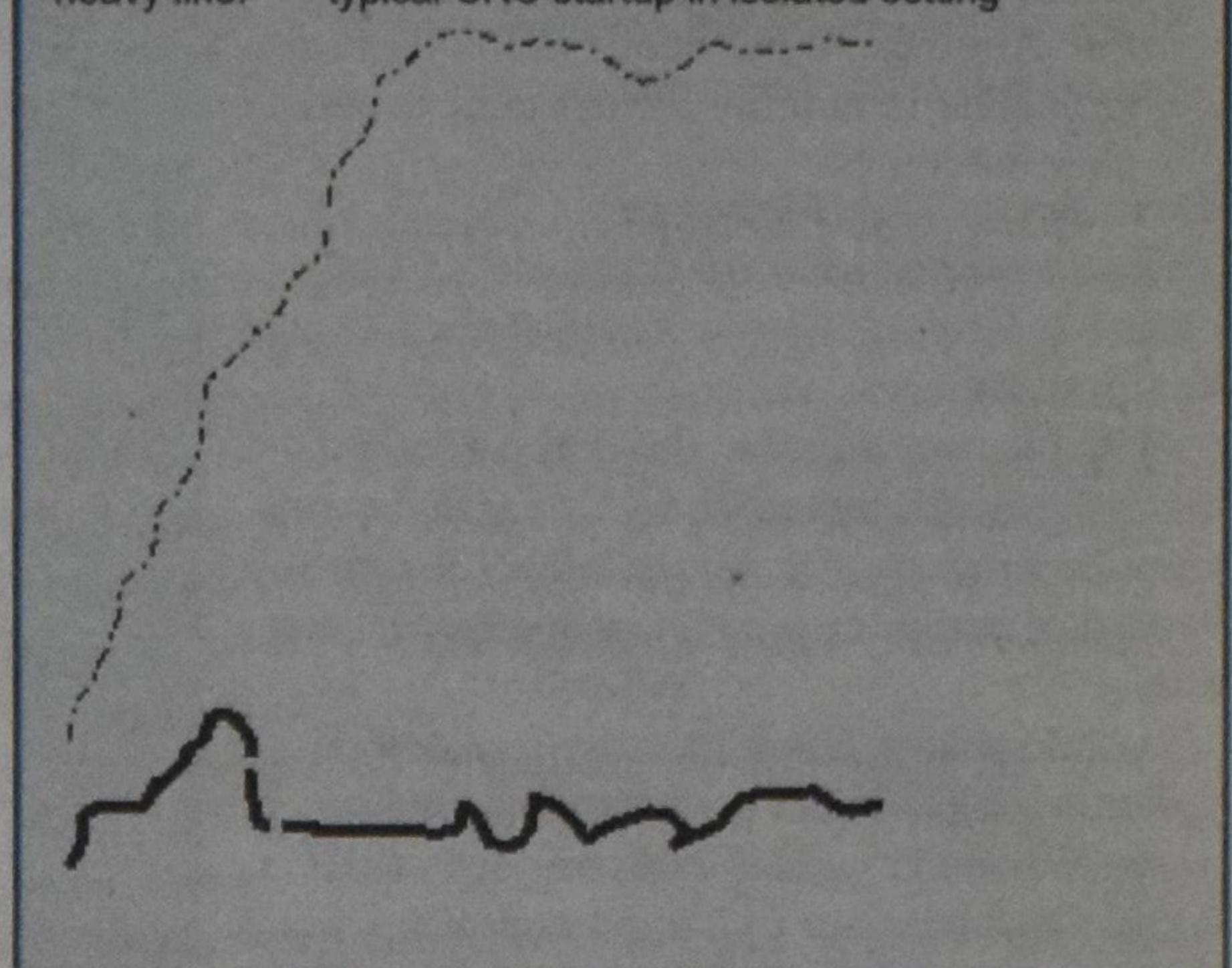
Plateau is a term connoting three events – 1.) an initial rise in membership, followed by a 2.) marked leveling of the membership plot, and 3.) an extended period of time in which the congregation fails to reestablish its former pattern of growth.

In simple English we would say that a premature membership plateau describes a congregation that is "stuck."

LandsEnd CRC is a congregation with a premature membership plateau. It had reached 120 souls but dropped down to 60 members. Elder DeVries, despite his faithful efforts, doesn't know how to move the congregation back to the original growth pattern of the first several years of ministry.

If the chart below represents a typical startup church in a large cluster (dashed line) and the lower line (solid) represents a startup church in an isolated setting, we see the comparison. What is important for our purposes here is that the isolated church ministers to 100 people for 20 years while

dash line: typical CRC startup church in a large cluster
heavy line: typical CRC startup in isolated setting



the clustered congregation ministers to 500 or more.

Let's talk about the plateau in this article.

The plateau and its causes

The PMP (premature membership plateau) means that a congregation has not reached its expected potential in a reasonable amount of time. Churches go into a plateau for a variety of reasons, some natural and some traumatic. Of all the reasons for PMP, I share the most important reason – fragmentation.

New church fragmentation

Fragmentation is the understated disease of new churches. Like an opportunistic polio virus, fragmentation attacks young, fragile congregations at their most vulnerable time of life, leaving congregations broken for years, if not for life. Following are the three phases common to fragmentation in a new church.

1. Fragmentation Phase One: Initial Growth. A typical scenario is that of LandsEnd. For the first three years of ministry the vibrant pastor, schooled at Willow Creek, assessed by the "Boot Camp" team, and bursting with energy, accomplishes his ministry objectives and the congregation grows. It is typical that a new, isolated ministry will gather 100 souls in its first two to five years. The founding nucleus and added members sometimes reach as many as 200, but only rarely.

2. Fragmentation Phase Two: The Unexpected Crisis. At Phase Two, the founding nucleus (ten or twenty adults) is superseded by the incoming new members. Control of the church ministry passes from the nucleus into the hands of the new community members – people who often have no CRC tradition. The nucleus can rebel at this loss of power and leadership. In my experience, this happens at the three- to five-year mark. This phase of crisis and conflict is of short duration – perhaps one year.

3. Fragmentation Phase Three: The Plateau. Phase Two is followed by a breakup in the new church. A mix of both nucleus and new members often abandons the fledgling ministry. Routinely the pastor accepts a call as happened at LandsEnd CRC, leaving an "elder De Vries" in charge. The congregation limps along, neither growing nor dying. External support is generally required to sustain the crippled ministry. This phase can last from one to two decades, though many congregations fail outright at this point.

Church

Published data on new churches which fragment remains necessarily incomplete. In my observations, only about half of these congregations survive the actual Fragmentation. Another 30 per cent eventually return to the growth track. The remaining 20 per cent experience a variety of other outcomes.

There is no published information describing the toll exacted from the participants in an isolated church planting. Even so, I can assure you that more than a few lives and careers have been broken during this process. To add insult to injury, the journals which celebrate the "grand opening" of a new ministry have never (in my experience) published a word in support of those which fail; the ministers and members are routinely left to fend for themselves.

How often does fragmentation of PMP occur?

I just described fragmentation as an important cause of PMP. (Other causes exist.) You wonder, how often does this happen? Is it important? Why don't we hear about this problem? In this section I will try to answer those questions and also to explain this phenomenon further.

Classis PNW as a case in point

My experience in the Pacific Northwest includes six isolated church plants, which compare closely to all isolate church plants in CRCUSA.¹

- One of the six congregations has grown to a large size – 300 souls and growing.
- Three of the six congregations fragmented and plateaued around 100 souls for no less than a decade.
- Two disbanded.
- Very substantial denominational support was provided for all six.

One in six congregations – 16 per cent – successfully crossed the 200-Barrier. The remaining five – 84 per cent – have either disbanded or have failed to cross the 200-Barrier.

No matter what the cause for this low success rate, the simple fact of 84 per cent of new church plants not reaching 200 members is disconcerting.

Class of 1970

My next presentation is a table of the eight congregations which were organized in 1970 and which were reporting for the 1995 *Yearbook*. We will observe that the four isolated congregations remained small (under 200 members) and that the clustered congregations were all large.

What were the results? There were eight congregations which met the criteria. Four of them were larger than 200 members. Four were smaller. What can we learn by compar-

Table 1 *The Class of 1970*

Church Name	City, State	Members in 1995	Number of additional CRC living in 20-mile radius
FOUR CONGREGATIONS FAILED TO CROSS 200			
White Lane	Bakersfield CA	65	65
Kimberly Village	Davenport IA	58	58
Fellowship	Greeley CO	120	120
Gallatin Gateway	Bozeman MT	191	468
FOUR CONGREGATIONS SUCCESSFULLY CROSSED 200			
Trinity	Rock Valley IA	568	6,746
Cottonwood Heights	Jenison MI	759	67,290
Heritage	Byron Center MI	767	56,481
Madison Square	Grand Rapids MI	1052	56,592

ing the larger and smaller groups?²

These are some of the ways that an environment changes a congregation's ministry, based on *Table 1, The Class of '70*.

- All the larger congregations were in a cluster of congregations (within twenty-miles)
- All the larger congregations were in a cluster of over 1000 additional CRC persons.
- Generally, the larger the surrounding CRC population the larger the congregation was likely to grow.
- The more isolated a congregation is, the more likely the congregation is to remain small in size.

Note that the smallest of the large congregations, Trinity in Rock Valley is more than twice the size of the largest of the isolated congregations. The average size of the smaller congregations is about 110 members. The average size of the clustered congregations is nearly 800 members. *The average size of the clustered congregations is about seven times larger than that of isolated congregations.*

Table 1 gives a strong indication that the small size of many congregations is closely related to geographic isolation.

What happened to the Class of 1970 in the ten years following 1994?

Table 2 shows that the same eight churches fared as might be expected in the time period between the 1995 Yearbook and the 2004 Yearbook. The first four congregations report two disbanded congregations and two which report significant membership loss. Those in the larger clusters suffered a minimal loss during a decade in which the CRC experienced a 12 per cent membership decline. One clustered congregation gained a few members.

Table 2

This sample is too small to be truly scientific. Even so, it is descriptive of what can be demonstrated many times over in the CRC.

You may object that the sample from 1970 is interesting anecdotally, but not a representative or a scientific sample, or even contemporary – after all, church-planting technology has changed in the past 35 years. We've been through telemarketing, mass-mailings, small-nucleus starts, Seeker Sensitivity, Unchurched Harry and Saddleback Sam. Robert Schuller taught hundreds of CRC pastors and spouses since 1970. Surely, things are different now.

Classes of 1987-1995

Are things different? Does our new skill increase the rate of church growth? Of the congregations organized between 1987 and 1994 (reporting in 1995) the results are

comparable; clustered congregations did not plateau while isolated congregations did.

Table 3 shows that the data for these more recent congregations has not improved.

In seven years, 1987-1994, 72 per cent of the clustered congregations grew to at least 200 members.

In the same amount of time only 6 per cent of the isolated congregations reached 200 members.

Let's make the contrast even more pointed. *If you were the pastor of an isolated church planted between 1987 and 1995, you faced a 94 per cent probability to never see 200. Those congregations entered a PMP and did not resume growth.*

Table 3 *The Class of 1987 - '94*

Ministry Types	Crossed the 200-Barrier	
	Successful (%)	Unsuccessful (%)
Isolated Congregations n=36	6	94
Clustered Congregations n=43	72	28

As of the last reliable data available to me, our new skills in church planting and growth are not overcoming the drag caused by isolation.

Experience of 136 Congregations

You may suggest that the PNW is an isolated example, a rare circumstance. *Rather than rare, however, this pattern has been the rule for as long as I have been able to measure church growth. Let's take a larger sample.*

Twelve years ago (ca 1995) I completed an exhaustive study of all 136 congregations which organized in the CRC between 1970 and 1990 and which were still doing ministry in 1994. I have shared some of the findings already in this article.

Each time I study the 139 congregations of my research looking for factors that influence a congregation's ability to cross the 200-Barrier the results are highly consistent:

- Congregations planted within the boundaries of a large cluster are at least 65 per cent likely to reach 200 members.
- Congregations planted in isolated settings are no more than 15 per cent likely to reach 200 members.

After 28 years of extensive research I am observing that a key factor behind the Premature Membership Plateau of many congregations is geographic isolation. Then, when fragmentation occurs in these congregations, and it seems to be commonplace, the isolated congregations are rarely able to regroup and reestablish their membership growth patterns within a decade or two.³

Continued on page 14...

Table 2 *The Class of 1970 as Reported in 1995 and 2004*

Church Name	City, State	Members in 1995	Members 2004
White Lane	Bakersfield CA	65	disbanded
Kimberly Village	Davenport IA	58	disbanded
Fellowship	Greeley CO	120	68
Gallatin Gateway	Bozeman MT	191	160
Trinity	Rock Valley IA	568	666
Cottonwood Heights	Jenison MI	759	578
Heritage	Byron Center MI	767	709
Madison Square	Grand Rapids MI	1052	976

Church

Table 4.
Isolated Congregations versus Clustered Congregations

Geographic Setting	Who	Average Congregational Membership
A congregation in an Isolated Classis	Six Isolated Classes of CRCUSA	110 souls
A congregation in the large Clusters of West Michigan	East Georgetown Grandville North South	600 souls 500 souls 500 souls 400 souls 450 souls

You can repeat this research yourself with a recent Yearbook. I suggest the following:

Find the average membership size of all congregations in Texas.

Find the average membership size of all congregations in Alberta.

Divide them into the "clustered" and the "non-clustered" to verify how consistently the isolated congregations are the smaller congregations.

For a variation on this project, identify all the congregations in your classis which were begun as splits from a larger congregation. Compare the splits to those which are isolated.

You will find the same pattern that I found – Isolated congregations experience a membership plateau that keeps them below the 200-member mark and often near 100 members in size.

Magnitude of the problem of Premature Membership Plateau

How many congregations are in this situation of PMP? This is difficult to answer because my data for Canada is incomplete. It is safe to say, however, that at least 100 CRCUSA congregations are isolated **and** in PMP, fifteen percent of CRCUSA.

Most Classes face this dilemma as Classical Home Missions Committees (CRCHM) agonize over the allocation of limited funding in hopes of planting new churches that grow to be large and financially self-supporting.

Records of Synod include a long paper trail of efforts to deal with small churches, including such uplifting names as the "Fund for Needy Churches," and the "Fund for Small Churches."

CRCHM certainly struggles with PMP on a daily basis as they fund and encourage and plan for the effective planting of congregations throughout the US and Canada.

If we move beyond the number of congregations in PMP and think in terms of human beings and personal sacrifice the magnitude of this issue becomes overwhelmingly large.

Whatever the exact magnitude of PMP, the cost to everyone involved is huge.

An aside on evangelism and the PMP

What about evangelism and the PMP?

- Why don't the isolated congregations simply "grow their way out of the plateau?"
- Why don't they evangelize a hundred members and become larger?
- A variation on this theme is: "Well, this is all good and interesting, but how does it help us reach our goals of evangelism and congregational strength?"
- Maybe all this "numbers business" is an unspiritual distraction.

I believed, when I was a student, that the growth problem was due to reclusive pastors and indifferent congregations

which simply chose to remain small rather than grow through evangelism. I believed that because it flattered my immature ego. And because people in ministry told me it was so. I hereby repent of my foolishness.

Now, 26 years later, I am not so proud to think that I can simply exert my ministry wills and skills to grow a church by choice. Not at all. Rather, I and every pastor I know in an isolated congregation urgently want their congregations to grow to a stable, self-supporting size and beyond. My colleagues and I have done everything we know to bring growth to our smaller congregations.

One consistent problem is that evangelism growth simply doesn't happen quickly enough to overcome the high turnover rates of our culture.

For example, in my congregation we have lost 20 per cent of our membership to normal transfers this past year. Just to maintain our size (nominally 100 souls) we must grow by 20 per cent each year. Imagine the challenges to maintain ministry programs with a 20 per cent rate of transfer when almost all new members have no previous experience in the CRC. This is common to isolated and urban congregations which do not enjoy the benefits of the stable surrounding cluster.

Isolated Congregations need wholesale growth to overcome turnover, but evangelism seems to be a retail business. We need dozens of converts but we receive them by ones and twos. To date we are mostly unable to overcome this problem.

To grow to 200 members, the isolated congregations must attract new members and grow at a rate (20 per cent) that many clustered congregations cannot do, even in Grand Rapids – and do it with less resources. To reach 200 members we would have to grow by 50 members per year. It's not as easy as it looks.

Towards a new cluster

If you have been reading along these past several articles that *Christian Courier* has graciously published you will know that I have been promoting the role of the cluster, a group of 1000 or more CRC persons, at least three congregations, and each one no more than 20 miles from another, as one key element in church planting. I believe that the cluster of congregations represents our best hope and strategy for planting new churches.

But we're not making any more new clusters. The galaxies may be forming new stars, but immigration is over for the Dutch. There are no new "Pellas" in the works. We'll never grow by the same patterns of the past 100 years. But we can learn something from the pattern. We can learn that God made us most effective in the covenantal, cooperative community. As a closing thought I share a little about one such community.

I have hinted that Seattle, Washington, is experimenting with a new concept – the Synthetic Cluster. A what? A Synthetic Cluster that is formed in a new way. Our older clusters were formed by the happenstance of immigration patterns. Pella, Orange City, Grand Rapids, Ontario, Canada, Calgary, Alberta and a few dozen other clusters were formed by immigrants.

In places where there is no cluster it may be possible to establish a Synthetic Cluster. I give you Seattle as an example.

Seattle has been the home of two congregations for many decades – First Seattle and the remote Bellevue, with a combined membership of less than 1000 souls. About 1990 two congregations were added – Mill Creek and Emmaus Road. The total number of souls still amounted to less than 1000 and the congregations were isolated by distance and

separated by the huge Lake Washington.

About four years ago CHMC invited pastors to form intentional groupings of congregations and pastors which work together. Classis PNW formed three ongoing clusters – one each in Lynden, Mount Vernon and Seattle.

I know the Seattle cluster best. The two original congregations decided to work with the two newer congregations and to adopt a fifth new congregation and eventually to establish a large number of new congregations in Seattle. And the cluster was ready to be born. These five congregations decided to work together and to plant ... are you ready? they plan to establish twenty! new congregations by 2010. Some will be new plants. Others will existing store-front ministries that are adopted into the cluster and then into the CRC.

Now, just over three years later, a Korean congregation is part of the mix; Brian and Betsy Turnbull have begun a house church, and Clarence Presley is bringing his Afro-American congregation into the fellowship of this Cluster. And Presley is bringing an additional Afro-American pastor to consider joining this cluster (and perhaps joining the CRC.)

Another six to ten young ministry leaders meet regularly with the original members to consider God's call to plant additional congregations within a few miles of the existing congregations. They could become the founding pastors of an additional six new bi-vocational congregations.

Within another two years it is possible that the two original congregations will have multiplied into a network of ten congregations. The total membership will cross 1000 souls and the new congregations will be planted between and among the existing congregations, thus forming a true cluster as we have defined it.

These congregations and pastors have come to believe that cooperation and synergy will enhance the ministry of each. The cooperative prayer, meeting together, sharing of office space and encouragement has built the identity and nurturing that everyone needs.

That's a little of the story of Seattle. I know of two additional proto-clusters, one in the Sacramento, California, area and one in Houston, Texas. In these three areas pastors have decided to collaborate in ministry for their mutual benefit. We all will do well to support this effort with our prayers.

Back at Center City, Greetcha and Mary stand by as three pastors decide the financial fate and the future of struggling LandsEnd CRC.

Greetcha is lost in thought as the conversation continues.

She fingers her Melamine cup, swirling the dregs of a thousand cups of coffee served on her heirloom table, wondering the fate of LandsEnd.

Footnotes

¹ I know of additional PNW church plants. I chose these six plants because these six had the strongest sponsorship, the most support and were aimed at the dominant Anglo culture. In other words, they had every circumstantial reason to succeed.

² Please know that I have deep respect for all of these ministries. I single them out only in the hope of honoring them for their ministry in the difficult circumstance of isolation. Also, please note that Gallatin Gateway is about 21 miles from the Bozeman-Churchill congregations according to my mapping program.

³ Note that ethnic isolation probably compares very closely to geographic isolation. An isolated Vietnamese CRC congregation in Pella, Iowa may feel as isolated as an Anglo congregation in Fort McMurray, Alberta.

Poems/Communion

**Blizzard or Not**

They forecast a blizzard
And we had a certain anticipation for it
Hunkered down for the day
As the drifting snow blurred the horizon
Sifted over the rooftops
Whirled with the pine and weeping birch
The temperature dropped
As it should for January
This storm precipitated by a coastal system
Vancouver again hammered by 100 kilometers
Of tree-ripping wind power
Out east people eye the water
In the Rideau Canal
Their skates useless on pegs
Green is still the color on Toronto lawns
No ice fishing to their north
Polar bears studied for the Endangered Species list
If our hearts are listening
We can hear creation groan
People have names for it
Like Global Warming
We become afraid of this world
Of what we have done to it
Reach out our hands to take its pulse
And attempt to quit battering it
Perhaps glacial ice won't last forever
But there is comfort in God's promise
In Genesis
That there will always be
"seedtime and harvest
summer and winter.....
as long as the earth remains"

Come

Jesus come
Beside me
Near me
In my head
to want to seek you
In my heart to love like you
Stretch it inside out to tenderness
Turn it upside down
To empty it of selfishness
Let your love
Nest there
Hatch and grow into
Something
That looks like you
And come back
Soon

The communion of the saints

Before I could recite the Apostles' Creed myself, I can remember our congregation saying it together during church services. At that time, around age 6, I was too young to know the words, let alone know what they meant, but I always looked forward to the confession. When the congregation would speak I was intrigued by the sound of the letter 's' that would fill the sanctuary. The words were too big for me to understand, the concept much too deep but those s's were the attraction to me. Especially during the portion of the creed where the s's are in abundance..."the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body..."

Never did I think the words 'communion of the saints' would take its form in the way it has over the past several weeks.

Five days before Christmas day, our doctor gave us the news that my wife Marisa had breast cancer and that she would have to undergo surgery to remove the tumor. Rewind 24 hours and Marisa and I are talking about trying to have another child. Fast forward 24 hours from the day of diagnosis and we are in the hospital while Marisa goes through numerous tests, including x-rays, scans, ultrasound and a biopsy. That day we are praying that the cancer is *only* breast cancer. Perspective is a fickle beast. How did we get in a matter of three days from family planning to praying Marisa has one type of cancer?

If God was looking for specific prayers, they were coming fast and fervent.

The day the diagnosis came down, prayers from our family and close friends went up. Naturally we felt quite low that first day. The more and more people found out, the more prayers went up and the more peace we felt. Communion of the saints. Sure, we still have times and days that feel heavy, but the strength we source from the community is much of what helps us press on and take courage.

I'm not saying that it is unfair that a seemingly healthy 32 year old mother of three kids ages 4, 2 and 7 months gets cancer, but it sure seems unnatural. The prayers that the cancer would only be in the breast were answered – just not in the way we humanly hoped. The cancer had spread to the liver, which ruled out surgery and made chemotherapy the next option. Marisa has just begun chemotherapy and will continue to be on

My window seat

Mendelt Hoekstra



it for six months.

Marisa and I were so used to having control. When our car had an empty gas tank, we had the control to bring it to a gas station for a fill up. When the kids were sick, we controlled the environment by bringing them to the doctor. When we were hungry, we ate and didn't think about being hungry again. When our recycling box cracked, we controlled the situation by fixing it. But when cancer hit us like a punch in the face, the control was no longer ours.

The worst part is waiting. Waiting reminds us that we are not in control. Waiting brings us to our thin place, the place where we are vulnerable, where we attach, cling, grasp to the things that mean the most to us. "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits...."(Psalm 130)

I like the Psalms. They give voice and song to desperation. They allow, and can even encourage one to question, cry out or call on the name of the Lord. In every uncertainty the Psalmist reminds us to take refuge in the Lord – which is easy to write about on paper, much harder to do.

Marisa has again joined another 'club'. I wrote a piece in 2005 about the miscarriage that we went through. When that happened, we joined a group of people that, unless one had experienced the sorrow of miscarriage, one can not fully understand what being in that 'club' is like. Cancer is the same. We meet, receive e-mails and letters from people we have known for quite some time who have beaten cancer.

I think all those people should wear a t-shirt that says "Praise the Lord, he cured my cancer." I'm looking forward to getting Marisa one of those t-shirts.

I've taken an indefinite leave of absence from work as our children need me home at this time. We have started a weblog for those who are interested in following her progress or would like to drop an encouraging e-mail. The web address is www.marisavanderveen.wordpress.com

Mendelt D. Hoekstra is the founder and director of the Music Therapy program at Bethesda, an organization owned and operated by the Mennonite Brethren Conference of Ontario, that supports adults with developmental possibilities. He lives in Vineland, ON with Marisa and their three children.

The Jesus Filter

I
Warm winter sun reaches
Through the kitchen window
Points fingers
So bright the grains of salt on the enamel stove
Stand up boldly and make shadows
Dust motes dance
And the pointing fingers
Find corners ledges and windows
That look clean in the shadows
Evening is time to entertain
Candles and firelight
Mute the realities

II
He comes with a bright light
So radiant that every thing is revealed
So bright we can't stand it
So bright he can't stand us
Until he slips in the Jesus filter
Red tones over our shabby efforts
And sees us
Through the eyes of his love

Poems by
Linda Siebenga

Nature

One river: two worlds

Curt Gesch

Probably my earliest memory of fishing took place a mile or so from home at the Onion River. I've never figured out why it is called the Onion River. When I was a child, it was a muddy river with almost no vegetation on the banks except overgrazed grass, certainly no onions.

As I recall, my dad gave my brother and me (each) a cane pole, baited a hook with worms, attached a bobber, and watched us catch tiny little bullheads. As the more accomplished angler, Dad baited his hook with a piece of potato, hoping to catch a big carp. He got a crayfish which held on to the potato with determination while being hoisted out of the water and to shore. A true sportsman, my dad released the crayfish unharmed.

I recall that my brother Willie got a small carp, a trophy of about nine inches. Being more trophy hunters than true sportsmen, we took the fish home for bragging and then buried them in the garden.

The Onion River produced lots of bullheads and carp, all of which tasted like mud. I remember one stranger who moved into town and said, "When I lived in central Wisconsin, we always ate bullheads and catfish. Very good fish."

He tried Onion River bullheads one evening; he was seen covertly heading for the garden with his spade later that evening.

We knew this river. We hunted along it, trapped muskrats along it. And caught disposable bullheads and carp in it. But it was a river in bad shape: eroded, with overgrazed banks, almost no riparian habitat, no aquatic vegetation in the whole section.

At one point, my grandfather told me, "way back when" the river was home to fish that one could eat: redhorse suckers and northern pike. There were still some pike. We even had an almost-cousin named Ivan Molter who occasionally went fishing for them in the spring and even caught some of the inedible snake-ish pike.

But for all the fun we had catching bullheads and carp, or trying to spear carp in the late summer when the river was so low we could see them gasping for air near the surface, the nearby Onion River was a desert, ecologically speaking.

Iran . . . continued from page 3

President Ahmadinejad has been very much in the spotlight. And he has succeeded in exposing some major weaknesses in the West over toward Iran.

The New York Times was not sure whether the criticism of the president was an internal matter or whether it signaled a change in foreign policy. His reckless redistribution of wealth and aggressive foreign policy have hurt rather than helped the poorest segment of the population, and this is where the Khomeinists get most of their political support.

Amir Taheri, an expert on the



More precisely, it was a vegetative mono-culture: grass, grass, and grass. In terms of water, it was liquid goop for most of the year. In terms of wildlife, muskrats, a passing mink or raccoon or skunk. In terms of birds. . . starlings and the odd heron (which probably preferred the taste of the frogs to the taste of the bullheads).

But times change. Rivers that are abused show amazing resilience. As agricultural practices changed, grazing the riverbanks became rare, because land tenants despaired of maintaining fences which washed out every spring. People began to buy river frontage just because there was a river: it may have been a muddy, but it was a river. These people occasionally ran a few horses, but mostly just took a part for their house and let the rest of the frontage grow up as it would. Some farmers just plain

from outside and believe the way to do that is to minimize needs.

Ahmadienjad has always been associated with the latter group, according to Taheri. When he was the mayor of Tehran, for example, he ordered the removal of all billboards carrying Western celebrities and replaced them with pictures of so-called martyrs (suicide bombers).

So the newspaper articles may indicate that the China model is winning out over the North Korean model.

gave up trying to raise crops on the flood plain because of regulations, the size of their equipment and the unpredictability of river levels.

The Onion River gasped, gasped again, and even took a couple real breaths as canary grass grew without hindrance. Ash trees colonized the flats; maple seedlings appeared as if by magic; a willow sapling turned into a clump of shrubby willows a quarter-acre in extent. The banks were covered with vegetation; shade cooled the water. Occasionally someone even found a sunfish or rock bass in the river.

Back when this process of land-use was just beginning to change, my Dad bought some sixty-five acres of battered, overgrazed floodplain. A couple small parcels were arable, the rest prone to flooding twice a year. The land had been hammered by heifers grazing it every summer. There were a couple patches of forest, a few clumps of willow, scattered ash trees and lots of eroded banks.

Not shy of working hard to aid the natural processes of revegetation, Dad and my brothers – and anyone else he could entice into helping – planted thousands of trees and bushes on their small piece of land. They deepened an old ox-bow, created a few ponds. It wasn't many years before the barren lands that I remembered became an oasis of wildlife. There were fewer muskrats in the river as the banks became forested but more of just about everything else. Deer loved the willows and marsh grass. Raccoons practically homesteaded the land. Rabbits rebounded in population. Pheasants found winter cover.

While trees grow slowly, nesting boxes can be made in a hurry. So, although there were only a few old hollow trees on the property, there soon were wood duck nest boxes in suitable habitat, and bluebird houses (which double as tree swallow houses, and house wren boxes) everywhere there was a meadow.

I suspect that it will be a long time until the water quality of the Onion River is respectable once more. The turbidity caused by carp is going to be a long-term, if not permanent problem, unless some piscatorian flu or another strikes these introduced fish. But, meanwhile, wherever people have simply kept their hands off. . . wherever people have consciously worked at restoring what human beings have destroyed through ignorance, greed or callousness, things are looking up for the Onion River.

Gerard Manley Hopkins says that the creation has suffered because generations of human beings

"have trod, have trod, have trod. . . until the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod."

He also says, however:

"And yet, for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

I've been privileged to observe that dear freshness in the history of a small section of the Onion River near Cedar Grove, Wisconsin.

I've been privileged to be part of a family that walks with a light step upon our Father's world: perhaps easing creation's groaning just a little.



Reflections



Evil doesn't fit this world

Bert Witvoet

Welcome to my perch
Bert Witvoet

Imagine having your wife give birth to your child on the very same day that you blow out someone's brain from the back seat of a car. The guy you knocked off was a fellow Mafia gangster and a friend of yours. You didn't particularly like the assignment, but, hey, you can't always pick the tasks you want. Some jobs suck, but you have to do them, unless, as in the TV ad about the unpleasant routine of doing inventory at Leon's, the boss agrees to an alternative route (slash all the prices and hold a warehouse sale). Nevertheless, it's a lousy assignment to have to put a gun three inches from the back of the head of your unsuspecting friend and pull the trigger. The result, of course, is that you end up being splattered with bits of flesh and blood from head to toe. And that on the day that you nestled your newborn child in your arms. Life just isn't fair.

"Big Sal" Miciotta, who is in hiding somewhere in the United States, tells his story to Evan Solomon of *CBC News Sunday*. He became an informer and, by doing so, he allowed police to break up the power of the Five Families of New York, at a time when he believed things were spinning out of control and all kinds of fellow Mafia were bumped off. Miciotta feared for his own life, and decided he might be better off going under a protection program after serving five years in jail. He had apparently joined the Mafia as a young man because it looked glamorous to him, and he had thought of it as an honorable society, with a strict code of conduct. Besides, the money was good, and you didn't have to work hard for it.

Few regrets

Miciotta himself was involved in five murders, he told Solomon. Only one killing bothered him. He accidentally shot a Brooklyn woman, a former nun who had become a social worker. Some of the buckshot from his gun wounded the intended target; others strayed and killed the woman. The other killings lost him no sleep. The victims were mobsters who didn't abide by the code, or they had crossed the head of a Mafia family, which is also against the code. No pity there. No regrets. Everybody knew what was expected, and you had to be prepared for the consequences. But that former nun, Veronica Zuraw ... that was another matter. Big Sal did lose sleep over that one. Something told him he had violated a code that went deeper than the Mafia code.

Another thing bothered Miciotta. The "honorable" society that made him and others rich by, among other things, operating a drug smuggling operation that destroyed thousands of youth and down-and-outers, lost its morale and internal discipline. There was nothing left for him to believe in. Besides, he felt it was only a matter of time for his own demise to kick in. The Mafia idol, it turned out, had clay feet.

Today he looks back on his life and says that it was a wasted life. So there are more regrets in his life than he first admitted to. He regrets having killed an innocent woman, he regrets the loss of an idol, and he feels his life has been wasted. He prays a lot today, he says. But he gave no indication of having found peace and forgiveness at the foot of the cross.

One thing you have to allow him – he is pretty straightforward and as honest as he can be. A retired New York City policeman, who worked on the case, testifies, "In my discussions with him, I've never had him tell me anything that I have later found to be untrue."

Dangerous pursuits

I was fascinated by this story, all the more so because it made me wonder how anyone can so easily dispatch a human life, even the life of a friend, because the cause demands it. But then, isn't that what we witness so often in this world? Think about the unspeakable cruelties committed by terrorists. A lot of Muslim youth who have become indoctrinated by the hate campaign of Jihadists lose their moral bearings and respect for human life. Or think of Hitler's attempts to wipe out the Jewish people. Or think of the Apartheid security forces, which tortured and killed opponents of Apartheid. Ideologies are dangerous, and they often come to us in the cloak of "honorable" societies and agencies. They write their own codes of conduct, which give the members a sense of nobility and respect. But all of them violate the basic human command to love God and your neighbor as yourself.

Some comfort

One good thing about the Big Sal story is that it reads like a morality play. As did the end of Hitler's life and evil regime. As did the demise of Apartheid. As did the fall of communism. As did the ignoble end of Saddam's life. It's comforting to know that in this world, filled with devils of various kinds, idolatry does not work. It doesn't fit the creation. It can't make the false claims of its inherently evil system work. It can't survive the assertion of God's intentions for our world. It's as if the good creation continues to rise victorious in the face of Satan's schemes. And it does because Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the creator and sustainer of this world, has won the victory over sin and death.

That's what makes irony possible and beautiful. Irony succeeds in this world because evil does not have the last word. That explains my use of irony in the first paragraph of this article, where I describe the inconvenience of being sprayed with your friend's flesh and blood on the day that your child was in your arms. It's ugly and yet beautiful. It's horrendous and yet so right. This is what joining the Mafia has brought you, Sal. And this is what life constantly teaches us whenever we go astray.

Time for a check-up

Your marriage came apart on your anniversary? I wonder why? What explains this inconvenient disaster in your life? Oh, I know, not all misfortunes can be explained by our moral failures. But especially when it comes to relationship problems or disillusionment in what we thought was an ideal set-up, it may be time to re-examine our choices and to ask whether we have turned away from the true worship of God. True security lies only in a life that is shaped by the desires of our God.

I have a succinct Latin phrase in my agenda book that I use as reminder of my own tendency to go it alone or to worship a false idol. It reads: "Idem velle atque idem nolle." It translates: "What he wants, I want; what he doesn't want, I don't want."

Psalm 119 in the version known as *The Message* puts it this way:

*Oh that my steps might be steady,
keeping on the course you set;
Then I'd never have any regrets
in comparing my life with your counsel....*

*I've banked your promises in the vaults of my heart
so I won't sin myself bankrupt.*

No regrets when you follow God's will. No bankruptcy when you deposit God's promises in the vaults of your heart.

Wishful thinking

Someone might want me to say, "Wouldn't it be nice if Big Sal could discover the divine counsel of eternal security and be saved?" Oh yes, we're always looking for a happy ending, aren't we. Why? Because it makes us feel better? But I feel so much better when killers like Big Sal get their just reward! Having him saved ruins my love for irony and poetic justice. Aristotle, for one, appreciated the cleansing nature of allowing a character to get his just rewards. Many tragic representations leave an audience feeling, not depressed, but relieved and almost elated. Look what Psalm 119 says:

*You reject earth's wicked as so much rubbish;
therefore I lovingly embrace everything you say.*

We can apparently derive great comfort from knowing that criminals will be rejected as rubbish. It justifies God's good commandments. It gives us a sense of wrong being righted.

Grace interferes?

But, now, unfortunately, I'm reminded of what a preacher said in our church recently when preaching on "grace." He made reference to 2 Timothy 2:11-13:

*Here's a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
[sounds good so far]
if we are faithless,*

[and now," said the preacher, "you expect the Apostle Paul to say, 'he will also be faithless' to maintain the symmetry of the poem, but no, Paul continues,"]
*he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.*

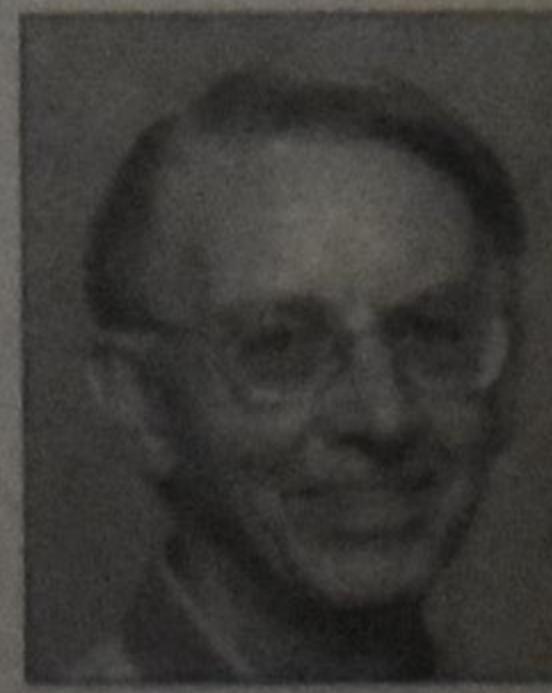
If we are faithless, he remains faithful? What's going on here? "That's grace," said the preacher. "It's in the nature of Christ that he remain faithful." So all poetic justice and parallelism must yield to the grace of a loving Savior? Rats!

(Please, allow me a few minutes to collect myself.) I guess a salvation play trumps a morality play ... sometimes ... when it's done well. Perhaps a redeemed "Big Sal" can instruct us in the road map of life even better than a doomed one. Imagine what it would sound like if he read from Psalm 119:

*Barricade the road that goes Nowhere;
grace me with your clear revelation.
I [Sal] choose the road to Somewhere,
I [Sal] post your signs at every curve and corner.*

Farfetched? You bet. But grace happens to be far-fetched – fetched all the way from heaven to earth.

Bert Witvoet is the former editor of CC, now retired, who stays active by editing the Christian Educators Journal and preaching the occasional sermon. He tries to stay informed by hearing and reading the daily news and Reformed by looking for writers and speakers who can tell the forest from the trees.



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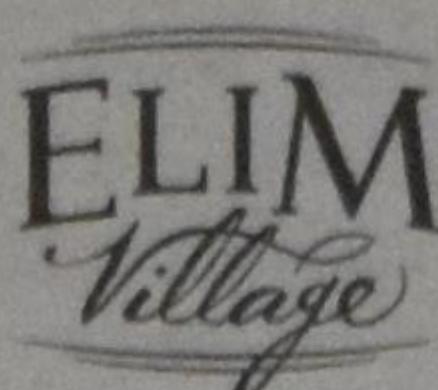
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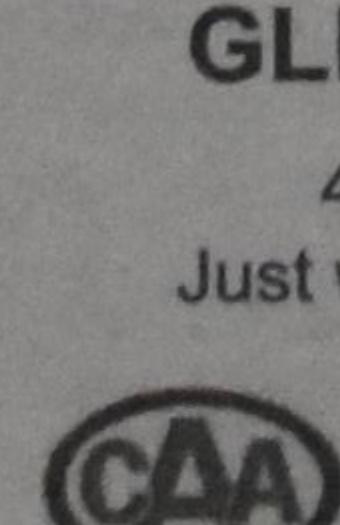
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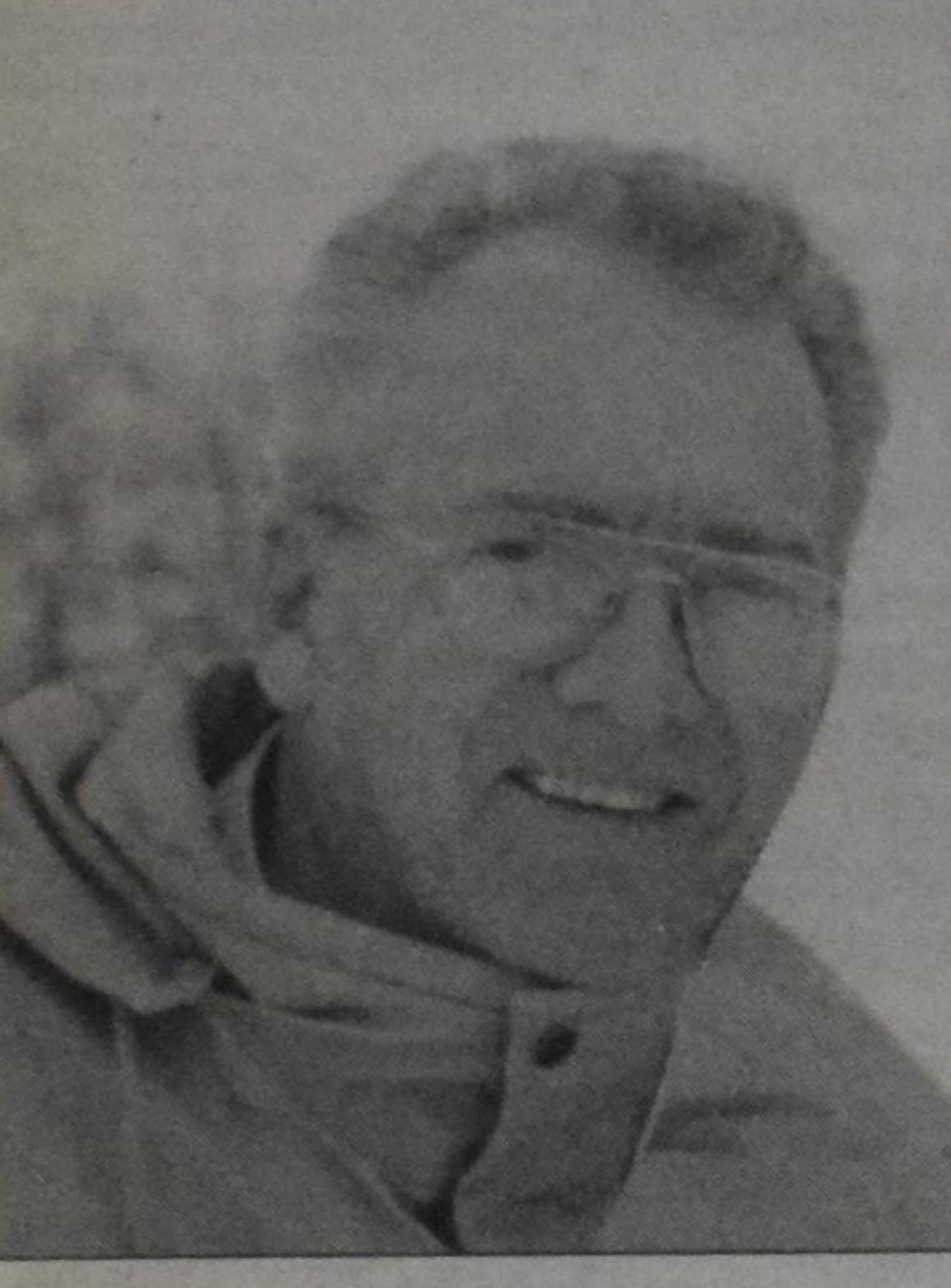
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Classifieds

Birthdays	Anniversary	Obituaries
<p>I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day. 2 Tim. 1:12b</p> <p>It is with great pleasure, we wish to announce the 80th Birthday of our dear husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather</p>  <p>Richard Bouwma</p> <p>We invite family and friends to join us as we hope to celebrate this joyous occasion with an Open House on Saturday, February 17, 2007 from 2-4 p.m. at Parkview Meadows Retirement Village (Common Room), 72 Towncentre Dr Townsend, Ont. Best wishes only please.</p> <p>Please join with us as we give thanks to our God for so many wonderful years. We pray the Lord will bless you with many more!</p> <p>With love from your wife, Trish And your children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dick & Liz De Vries, Nanticoke, Ont. Jim & Helen MacAlpine, Caledonia, Ont. George & Sandra Bouwma, Simcoe, Ont. Tom & Linda Bree, Kitchener, Ont. Harrison & Kathleen Mungal, Bolton, Ont. <p>Your grandchildren:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Melanie & Jamie Shurr, Wesley & Angie De Vries, Ronny & Tracy Fast, Daniela & Lindsay Radun, Mark & Bethany Vander Wier, Sid MacAlpine, Dave & Theresa Norsworthy, Evan MacAlpine, Brandon, Selina, Johnathon, Brittnie, and Joshua Bouwma; Meghan, Jaime, and Kalvin Bree; Karleen, Kristin, Kaneesha, Kyra, Jaydon, Jayona, and Jonelle Mungal. <p>Your great grandchildren;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skyler, Sierra, Spencer, Sullivan, and Savannah Shurr; Caleb, Clayton, and Cassidy DeVries; Evangeline and Elijah Fast; Dominik Radun; and Reese VanderWier. <p>Correspondence: 7 Marley Crescent Box 452 Jarvis ON N0A 1J0</p>	<p>As family, we hope to celebrate the 90th Birthday of our mother and Oma</p> <p>Gesina Aalbers (nee ter Haar) on February 10, 2007.</p> <p>We are thankful for her love and faithfulness and pray that God will continue to keep her in his care.</p> <p>Love and best wishes from her children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lisa & Ed Semplonius Linda & Henk Timmerman Gary & Rita Aalbers <p>11 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren</p> <p>Address: 310-100 Glen Hill Dr S, Whitby ON L1N 8R4</p> <p>For Rent</p> <p>Welland – Room available with Christian family for female student. Close to Niagara College Welland campus. Ask for Pete or Hilda Glasbergen at 905-732-6957</p> <p>Vacation</p> <p>HOLIDAY IN HOLLAND. Heated wooden cabin in Lippenhuizen, in the beautiful wood-ed area near Beetsterzwaag, or a restored nostalgic Frisian home in Oosterlittens, on waterways and near Sneek. Both in Friesland and are fully furnished, sleep 4/5 persons and are self contained, with w/d. Info at: utfanhus@planet.nl</p> <p>Dear Reader, First of all, we would like to introduce ourselves. We are a reformed family of 6 persons, father, mother and four children (aged: 18, 16, 12, 10). It is our dream to visit Canada in the coming summer-holiday. We think about a period of 3 or 4 weeks in the months of July or August 2007. But at this moment we don't have a place to stay in your country. Please, can you help us?</p> <p>Maybe we can exchange our houses. Or do you know somebody who may be interested? We live in Zwolle, The Netherlands, about 100 km from Amsterdam. We can offer you our house (5 bedrooms), car and bikes and so on. We would like to stay in the neighbourhood of Hamilton/Toronto, Ontario, since we have relatives in the area.</p> <p>If house-exchange is not possible, maybe you can give us addresses where we can rent a cottage or an other holiday accommodation.</p> <p>Please answer us by e-mail: azomerknegt@hotmail.com or g.zomer@zwolle-w.gkv.nl</p> <p>We are looking forward to your answer. With warm greetings, Fam. Gert Zomer, Fioringras 21, 8043 KA Zwolle. The Netherlands Tel: 0031-38-4524545</p> <p>Retirement or Family Home for Sale</p> 	<p>ADRIANUS AND MARIA VAN DYK (nee Hoogerbrugge)</p> <p>February 12, 1947, Overschie, the Netherlands</p> <p>60th Wedding Anniversary</p> <p>Art & Riet Van Dyk together with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, wish to announce the joyous celebration of 60 years of marriage. What a blessing! We invite you to share this milestone with us at an Open House, which will be held at the John Knox Memorial Christian School Gymnasium in Fruitland, on Saturday, February 17th from 3 - 5 p.m.</p> <p><i>Best wishes only, please.</i></p> <p>Mom and Dad, (Opa and Oma), we are thankful to God for the many years you have been able to share together and for the wonderful example you have shown us through your love for each other. May God continue to keep you in his care. With love, from your family.</p> <p>Wedding text: Ps. 37:4 <i>Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.</i></p> <p>Home address: 202-240 Quigley Rd Hamilton ON L8K 5M9 (905-578-7795)</p> <p>Classis Announcement</p> <p>With joy Classis E. Canada, in a Classis Contracta meeting, heard the examination of</p> <p>Candidate Winston Visser</p> <p>on Tuesday, Jan. 16, 2007, and admitted him to the ministry of the Word in the CRC. The Syn. Deputies concurred with this decision of CEC.</p> <p>His ordination and installation will take place, D.V., on Friday, Feb. 2, 2007, in a service that starts at 7 p.m. in the CRC of Athens, Ontario.</p> <p>James Kooistra, S.C.</p> <p>Do you know someone who may enjoy reading the <i>Christian Courier</i>? Let us know their name and address and we will send the next three issues to them at no cost.</p> <p>Call Rose at 1-800-969-4838 or email: rose@christiancourier.ca</p> <p>Tom DeRyk</p> <p>The family and friends of Tom DeRyk (many of whom were both, in his eyes and theirs) mourn his death in Collingwood, Ontario on January 23, 2007, at the too-early age of 65.</p> <p>A longtime resident of Wasaga Beach and Collingwood, Tom operated several businesses in Tobermory, ON. An active traveller, sailor and outdoors enthusiast, Tom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer 26 months ago. Participation in clinical trials at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto provided hope for him, and, as he often said when the going got tough, hope for the future of others. Tom's sister and brothers (Ena de Haan, John DeRyk, Dick DeRyk) thank the oncology staff at Princess Margaret, and in particular the nursing staff at Collingwood Hospital and his extended family in Collingwood, Sudbury, Toronto and elsewhere who cared for him so faithfully and well.</p> <p>A celebration of Tom's life and times will be held in spring. Feel free to contact the immediate family at deryk@dderyk.com.</p> <p>Predeceased by parents Dick & An De Rijk.</p>
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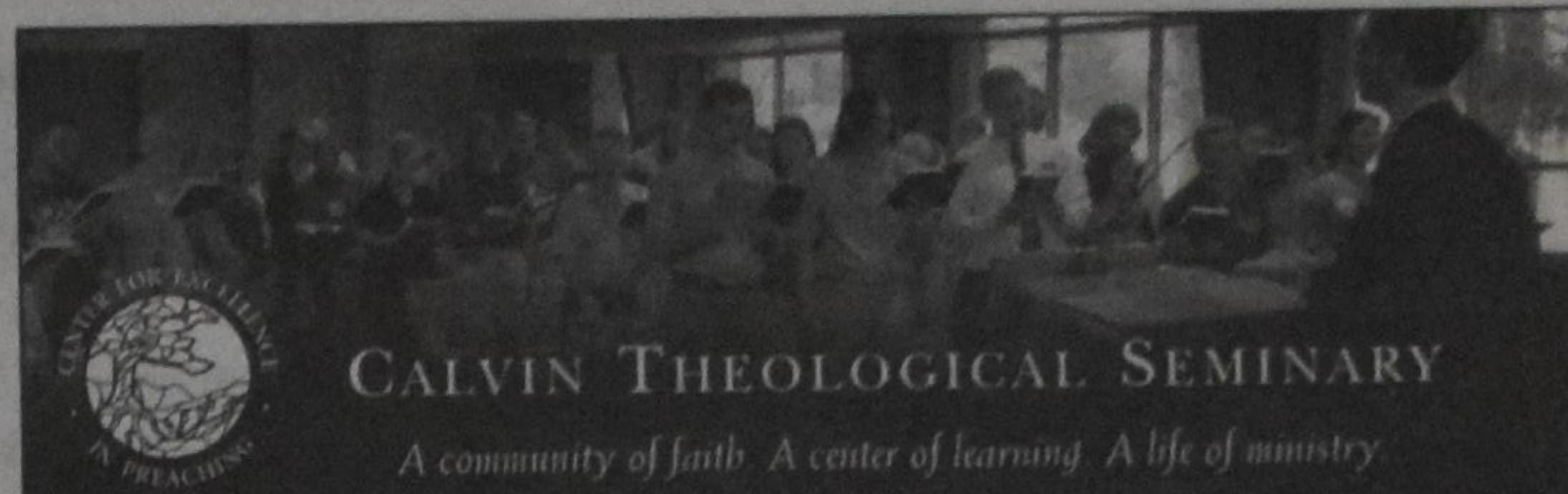
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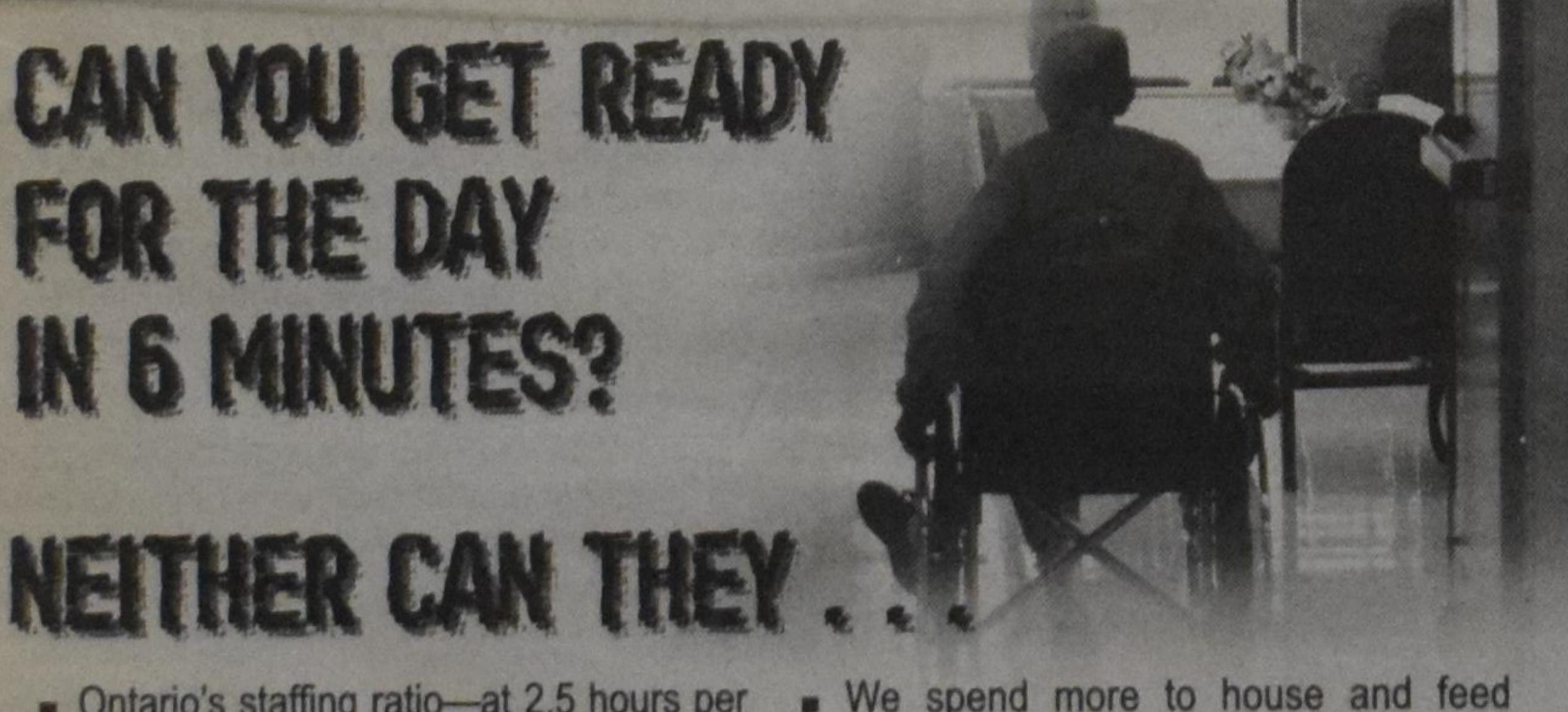
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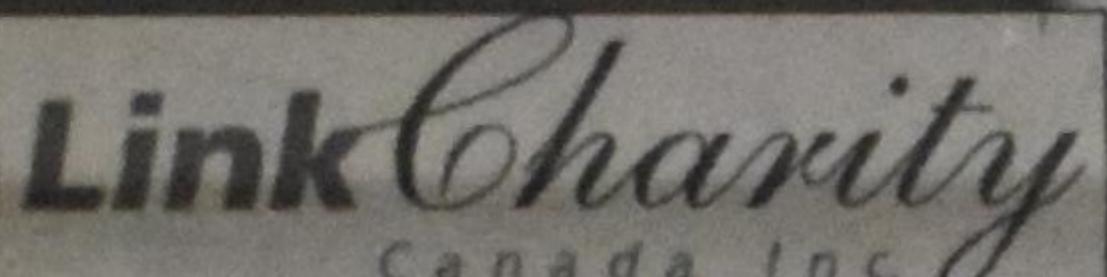
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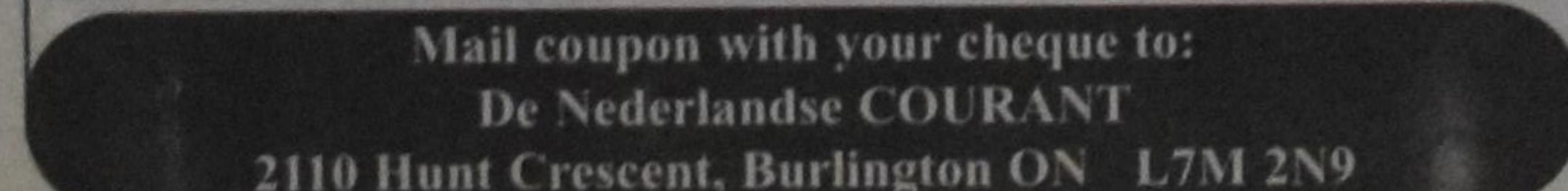
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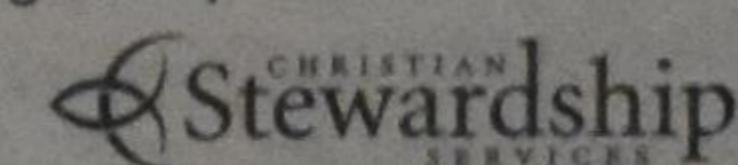
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FEBRUARY 5, 2007

Events/Advertising**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

Feb 4 Dutch Service will be held in the **Ancaster Christian Reformed Church** at 3:00 p.m. Rev. Jacob Kuntz will be preaching.

Apr 7 The Liberation Choir Fundraising Dinner will take place at 5.30 – 7 pm in Studio Theatre/Convention Centre at Hamilton Place with Micheal Coren as guest speaker. Included in this ticket price of \$ 200 is: prime seating at the concert and a Dinner Reservation. A \$ 100 tax receipt will be issued by Worldwide Christian Schools. Tickets available at Pianohouse Burlington, Worldwide Christian Schools, or Tjitske @ 905 520 0207

Apr 7 The Liberation Choir Burlington/Brampton Chapters perform in the **EASTER CONCERT** with Guelph Symphony Orchestra (Simon Irving, conductor) and a Combined Children's Choir (Elizabeth Webster, conductor) and Jennifer McMahon, soprano soloist. Director: Willem Van Suidam@ 7.30 pm, **GREAT HALL, HAMILTON PLACE, HAMILTON ON**. Ticket prices: \$40 \$33 \$25. Tickets available at: Hamilton Place Box office, Ticket master, Choir members, River Run Centre in Guelph, Selected Dutch Stores and at the Pianohouse Burlington, 5205 Harvester Road, Burlington. www.liberationchoir.com

Mar 2 Niagara Life Centre presents The Niagara Peninsula Orchestra, 7:30 p.m. at Covenant CRC, St. Catharines. See ad this issue for details.

Mar 2 & 3 Woodstock Dutch Theatre Groep - "Ik Voel Nattigheid" - Market Centre Theatre, **Woodstock, Ont.** 8 p.m. See ad for details.

Mar 9 & 10 Woodstock Dutch Theatre Groep - "Ik Voel Nattigheid" - Market Centre Theatre, **Woodstock, Ont.** 8 p.m. See ad for details.

Mar 30 Woodstock Dutch Theatre Groep - "Ik Voel Nattigheid" Christian Heritage School, **Jordan Station, Ont.** See ad for details

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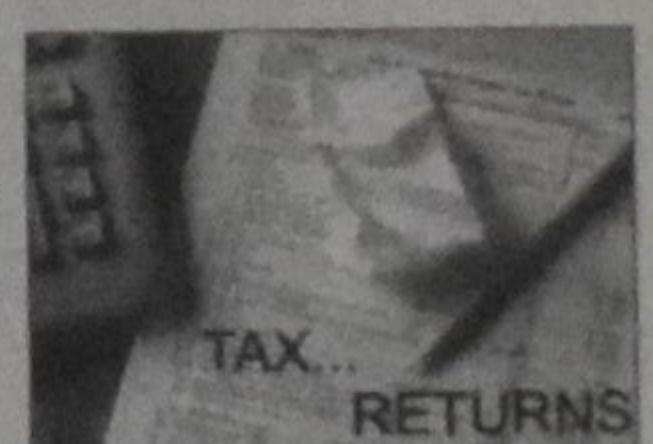
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News Digest

Mouth to pancreas

"He who guards his mouth preserves his life," says Proverbs 13:3 (RSV). The saying gets new meaning in light of the recent finding that pancreatic cancer is linked to gum disease. Okay, Proverbs doesn't tell you to brush your teeth and take care of your oral health. But the finding does point out what an integrated whole we human beings are.

Who'd have thought that taking good care of your teeth and gums by fighting plaque has any connection to pancreatic cancer? Researchers do not yet understand precisely how this works, but they speculate that the bacteria find their way to other parts of the body and then trigger cancer cells.

In some ways such findings are discouraging. Some day someone will discover that the reason I got colon cancer is because I didn't use deodorant. Too much interconnectedness can be depressing.

Satisfaction in Denmark

Over the past 30 years, Danes have scored higher than any other Western country on measures of life satisfaction. Is it because Denmark has discovered a formula for creating optimum conditions for the happy life? Is it something in the water? In the genes? No, say those whose business it is to figure out such things: it's because Danes have lower expectations than the rest of us.

Americans and Canadians apparently expect more from life than the Danes, so even if we get more than the Danes, it doesn't strike us as up to par. The Danes, on the other hand, are happy with a smaller slice of the pie. The Danes find a sock, and they say, "Ah, happy day, I've found a sock!" When I find a sock, on the other hand, I say, "Now where on earth is the other one? Rats - I bet I'll never find it."

Here's an idea for a new government program: an advertising campaign to convince Canadians that the future looks dismal. Folks, the educational system is going to pot; wages are going down; the air is getting more polluted; working hours longer; you probably won't get your pension; and you'll have to make do with one sock. Perhaps that would raise our happiness score.

Oh, I almost forgot. There are already numerous non-governmental agencies laboring mightily to convince us that we're headed for catastrophe, from evangelical groups to environmentalists.

Racism in Quebec

A few weeks ago all the Canadian papers carried news about the high percentage of Quebecers who are racist. How do they know who is and who isn't racist? The pollsters asked Quebecers whether they were. And 59 percent of them said they probably were to some extent.

But today we have made the definition of racism so much more subtle than it was 50 years ago. In those days as long as you agreed those of other races should have equal protection under the law and the right to vote, you were not a racist, not even if you believed whites were the carriers of a superior culture. Had they had such a definition of racism in mind, I suspect the vast majority of Quebecers would have emerged as free of racism.

Today most educated whites have probably been convinced that even if they consciously reject all forms of racism, deep down they probably still harbor some remnants in their hearts. Or they realize that they are complicit in structural forms of racism of which they are not even aware.

Maybe Quebecers just have a more sensitized conscience than the rest of us. Maybe they are the better Calvinists - more aware of the evils lurking in the human heart.

Looking into the past

Most of us living in the big cities don't do it very often - stand outside at night and stare up into the night sky to admire the stars. Light pollution leaves us with very little to see.

But next time you do, think of this: depending on which stars you're looking at, you are gazing thousands of years into the past. There are some very spectacular phenomenon up there, most of which we cannot see with the naked eye. A few years ago the Hubble telescope gave us images of "the pillars of creation," a colorful whorl of dust and gas 7,000 light years away.

If you had access to the Hubble telescope, you could still see them today. But they may actually already have been blown to smithereens. A space telescope that functions by infrared has detected a supernova blast that, scientists calculate, destroyed the pillars about 6,000 years ago.

And if that is true, we won't see the event for another 1,000 years.

Those who are older among us will understand this time lapse: it often takes a long time for my wife's words to reach my brain, and then even longer for me to make sense of them. Inner space is a lot like outer space.